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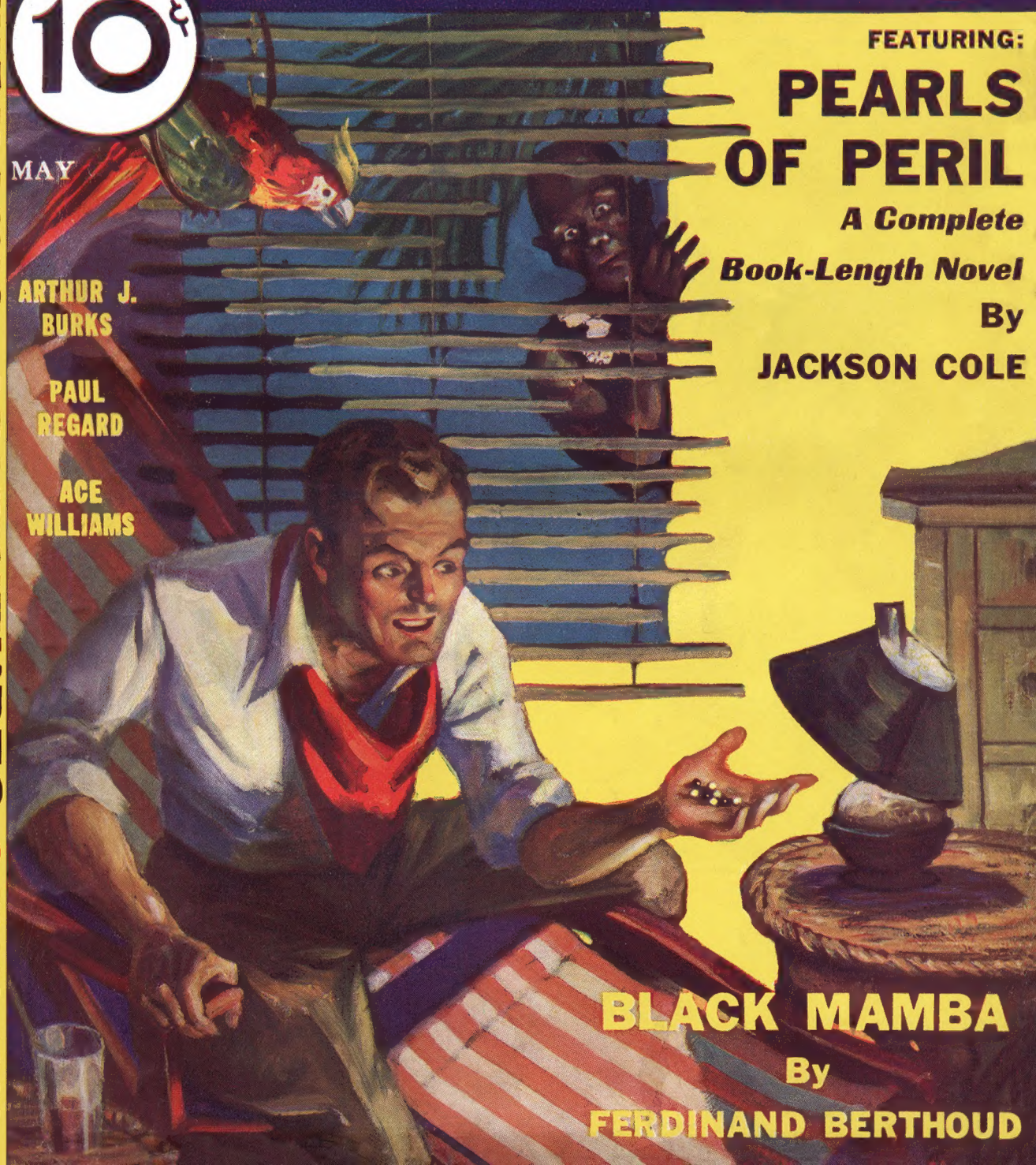
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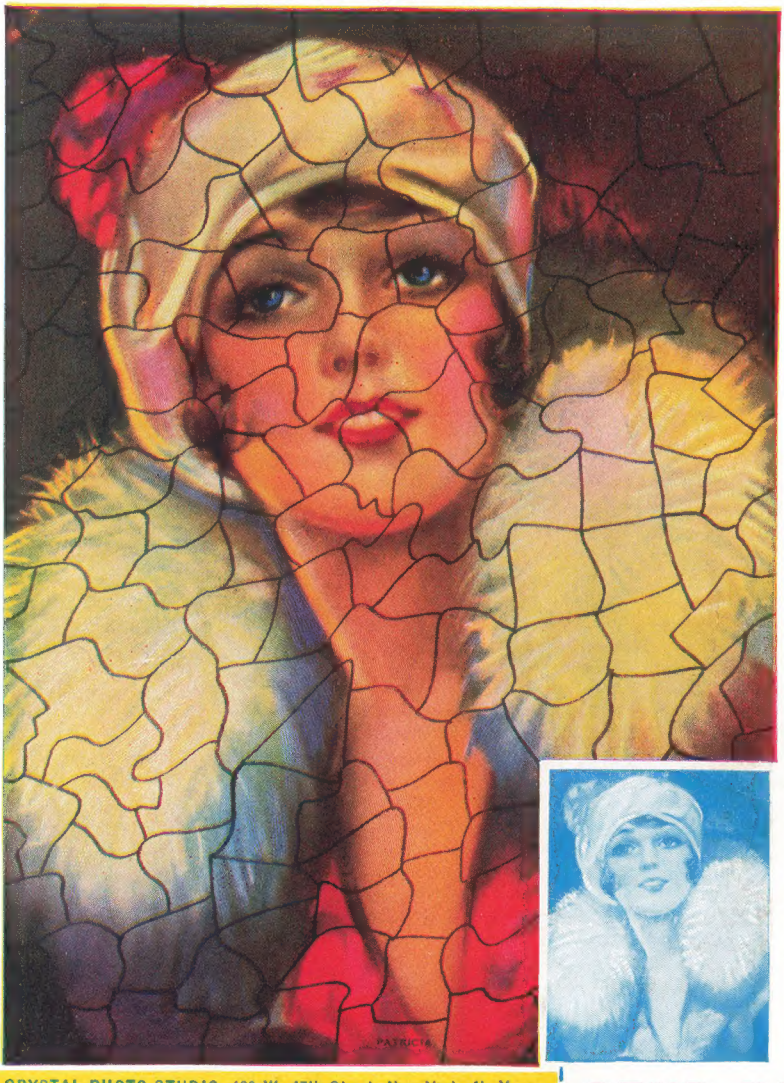
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THRILLING ADVENTURES

Vol. V, No. 3 J. S. WILLIAMS, *Editor* May, 1933

COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

PEARLS OF PERIL.....**Jackson Cole** 8
Modern Pirates and Cannibals of the South Sea Islands— and a Brave American's Daring Quest

COMPLETE NOVELETTE

THE FOURTH RING.....**Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson** 91
When the Bell in the Judgment Hall at the Castle of Ehrenburg Rang Four Times, It Hailed Death

THRILLING SHORT STORIES

UNDER WATER.....**Ace Williams** 45
Dramatic Adventures Aboard a Submarine
KWA AND THE SWAMP DEMON.....**Paul Regard** 53
The Conquest of Zalim, the Oppressor
BANDITS IN ERMINE.....**Arthur J. Burks** 81
Grim Vengeance in the Manchurian Wilderness
BLACK MAMBA.....**Ferdinand Berthoud** 109
Suspicion and Treachery Among Diamond Hunters

THREE-PART SERIAL

THE PROWLING CREATURE [Part II].....**Capt. Kerry McRoberts** 66
Continue this Weird and Thrilling Novel of Breathless Adventure on an English Animal Farm

THRILLING FEATURES

FAMOUS SOLDIERS OF FORTUNE.....**Illustration** 64
Sam Houston, Kit Carson, "Chinese" Gordon and Others
THE GLOBE TROTTER.....**A Department** 126
Where Readers, Writers and the Editor Meet

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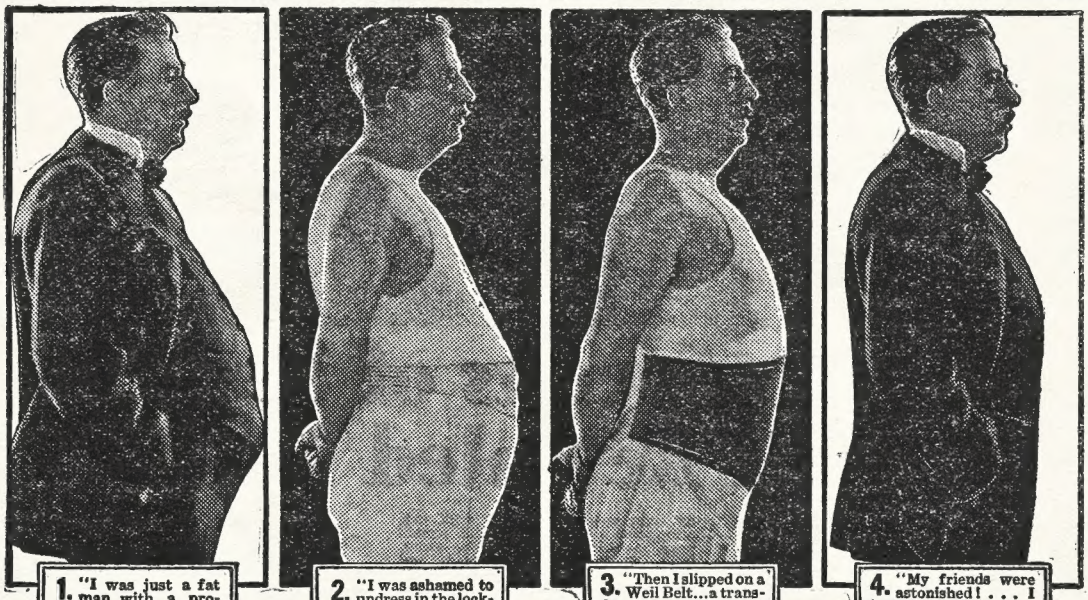
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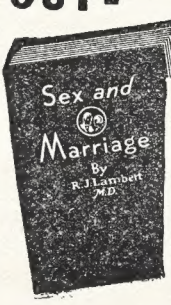
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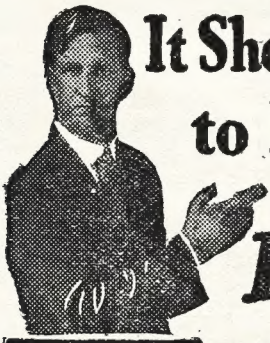
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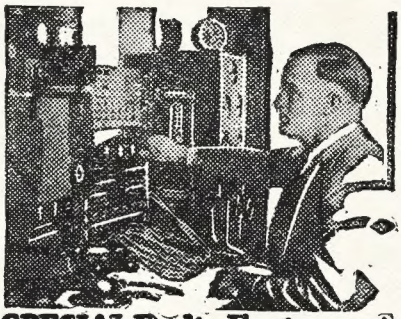
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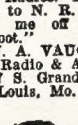
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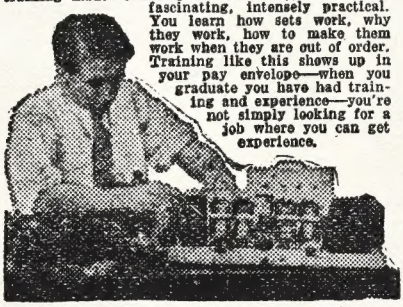
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With N.R.I. equipment, you learn to build and thoroughly understand set testing equipment—you can use N.R.I. equipment in your spare time service work for extra money.

I have doubled and tripled the salaries of many. Find out about this tested way to *BIGGER PAY*



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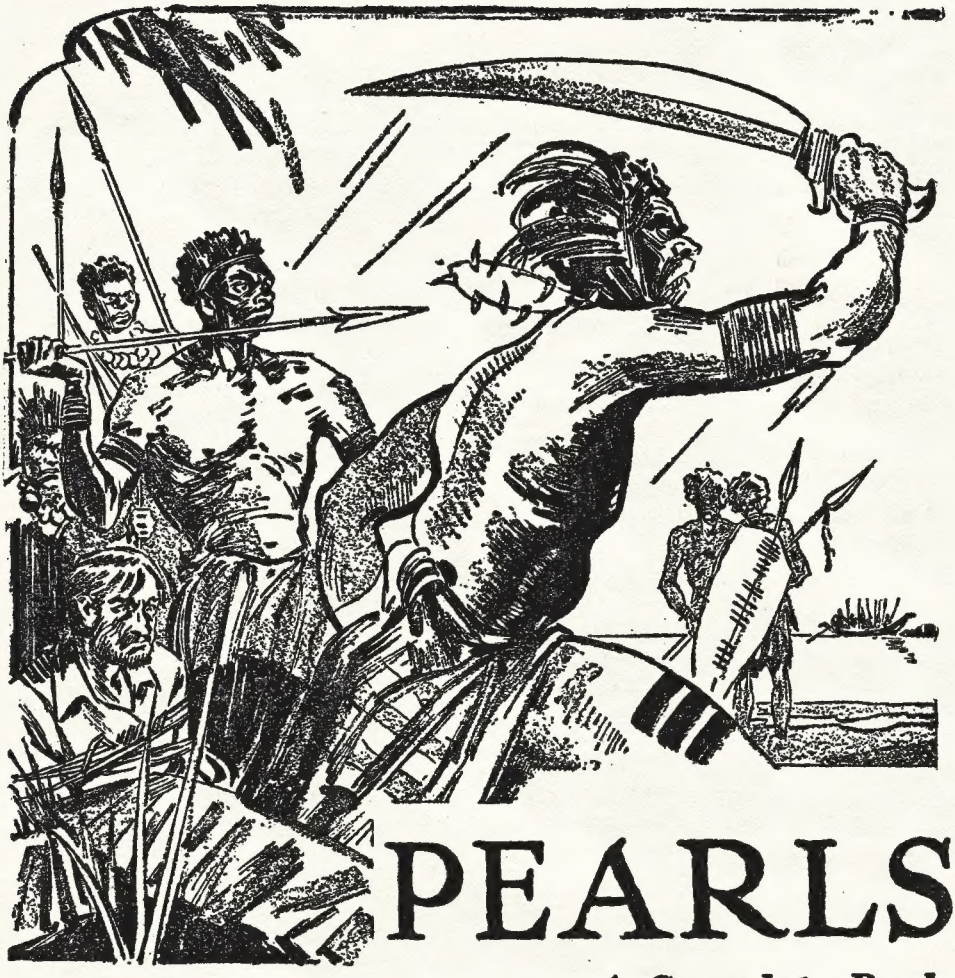
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CHAPTER I

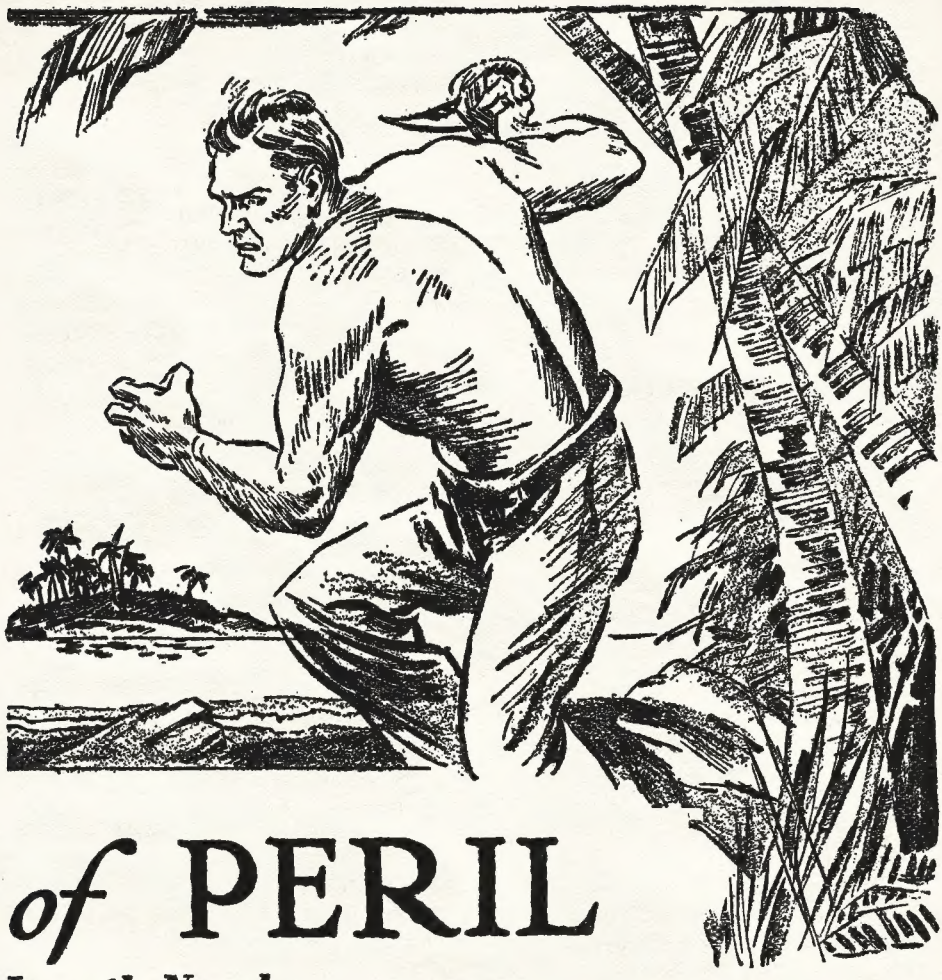
"Dangerous"

FOR THREE days now a heavy swell had come rolling up from the south showing that there'd been a storm down there. And he'd be lucky if he didn't run into the tail of it, Jimmy Cullen told himself as he made all snug aboard his little craft.

The American yawl *Buddy,* one hundred days out of San Diego. He'd built the craft himself, in off-hours, while he was working in a lumberyard. He'd learned his navigation out of a book.

They'd called him a fool—and maybe he was—for setting out on a cruise like this alone. But you can learn a lot in a hundred days of sailing alone. And since dropping the American coast astern he'd been through a blow or two.

Looked as if there was going to



of PERIL

Length Novel

COLE

"Gun Justice," etc.

be another. The wind was hauling around to the nor'east and getting stronger every minute. It met the swells coming up from the southerly quarter and scalped them. In the smother of shooting brine the *Buddy* was wet as a fish. But she rode all right—up, up, to hover on a sliding mountain, then to coast again into one of those rocking valleys.

Even when he was riding the crest of a roller the skipper of the little ship couldn't see very far. The sea-smoke smothered everything. Besides, the sky was low and the light was failing. Which wasn't so good. For if he feared anything, just now, it wasn't the sea, it was the land.

He was far down among the islands, in one of the loneliest and least known spaces of the South Pacific. There was a reason why this ocean wilderness should have found itself unpopular with white men—a

Islands—and a Courageous American's Daring Quest

number of reasons: reefs, cannibals and pirates, among a number of others.

"But, in any case," Jimmy Cullen told himself as he conned ship and sea, "you're where you wanted to be."

He'd slipped the tiller into beckets to relieve the strain on his arms. The yawl was down to hurricane rig —just a triangle of stout canvas forward not much bigger than a pocket handerchief and another one aft. Everything battened down. His little cabin as tight as a sardine can.

Funny, but he wasn't afraid. He never had been afraid. Not reckless, though. He knew danger when he saw it—before he saw it. Sailor blood, he guessed. His old man had sailed a lot.

YET he himself—he'd never seen anything more oceanic than the little old Rio Grande up to two years ago, at El Paso, where he was born and raised; there where old Judge Philco had wanted him to stay and be a lawyer.

But the call came clear on his twenty-first birthday when the judge, his guardian, passed over that sealed packet of papers that Mrs. Cullen, Jimmy's mother, had requested the judge to hold until her son should have come of age. There'd been no other legacy.

The scene came back to Jimmy Cullen now as he stood at a crouch in the wet cockpit of the *Buddy* while the great Pacific tumbled about him. Judge Philco's office had been small and dusty; airless, dry and silent.

But there'd been a chart of this part of the Pacific among the papers, and a story of pearls—pearls enough to make any man rich. Also the story of a partnership with a young Frenchman named Bernard d'Orlaine. So much in letters the elder Cullen had written. Then other letters, by other hands, and a few yellowed newspaper clippings.

Bernard d'Orlaine had, it appeared, murdered his partner. He was living now as a sort of king in this part of the world—the kind not of one tropic island, but of a hundred —hundreds—of them, it seemed.

"The only white man who could handle the natives. . . ."

". . . . and there's been no more pearl poaching since d'Orlaine killed off 'Bully' Finch and Captain Jim Cullen. . . ."

"What do you think you'll do, Jimmy?" the judge had asked.

"I think I'll sort of go out and look this up," he'd replied.

Sailing down across the wide Pacific looking for a man. When he found that man, he might have to kill him—or get himself killed. He'd changed a lot, he guessed, since that day he'd stood there in Judge Philco's office. But his purpose hadn't changed.

DOWN there on the Rio Grande, boys are apt to grow up sort of straggling—running to neck and legs, cowboy style. He had, at any rate. He'd stood six feet in his skinny socks when he was only eighteen. His mother had been a Texas woman, pioneer stock. But she'd gone as a school teacher to Honolulu and there met the brilliant young sea captain who'd become Jimmy's father.

"Glad I got that salt water in me now," said the skipper and crew of the *Buddy* as he braced himself in the howling chaos.

All he wore was a pair of faded blue overalls rolled above his knees. He wasn't weedy any more. He was like a fluent bronze statue—tanned to the color of a Choctaw—as he crouched and held.

But his eyes were the color of his overalls. And his hair—a ragged

mop that he'd cut himself to some extent—was a shade of bronze considerably lighter than the color of his back. It was a case of shift and strain every second of the time, and at every move there was a swell and ripple of muscles down his back, in the haul and thrust of his powerful arms. His head and neck and the set of his features would have served as a model for the figurehead of an old-time clipper ship.

BACK in San Pedro they'd called him a fool. But his navigation had been all right, he guessed, even if he had learned it out of a book. Day before yesterday he'd made his first landfall, right where he'd expected to make it—the blue peg of a mountain peak above the western horizon. And he'd known what it was: Hivoa, one of the Marquesas.

Hivoa—Motane—Faturiva—

Their names had sounded like music to him as he logged them off. But he'd borne away from them, off to the south and east, until he'd dropped them once more into the empty world from which he'd raised them.

News traveled too fast in these days of radio, even here in the Southern Pacific, and his chief hope was to come to Nekaloa unannounced. That was why he'd sailed alone and chartered a course that would keep him far off the regular sea lanes.

It was on Nekaloa—chief island of the so-called Nekaloa archipelago—that Bernard d'Orlaine, the island king, was supposed to have that royal residence of his. An island empire, scattered over some fifty thousand square miles of tropic sea. Yet on ordinary maps not even recorded. Even on the best sea charts not much more than a collection of dots and dotted lines; an area with a yellow line about it and marked "Dangerous."

In the storm and dark there was a shriek that pierced the thunder of wind and water, and Jimmy Cullen felt himself hurled away from his little ship like a rag of canvas.

CHAPTER II

Drums

HE KNEW what had happened—in the first split second while he still had the wrench of the impact in every nerve and muscle of his body.

The yawl had struck a submerged or partly submerged reef. That shriek he'd heard was from a tortured plank. It had been the voice of the yawl herself as she felt the claw of coral rock, and the voice had been like that of some living thing—of something human.

There for a time, Jimmy Cullen was fighting his way through fathoms of racing water. The speed of events—and the speed of his thought—was that of a plunge from a crippled plane. Plus strangulation. Plus the menace of the coral knives that had already, perhaps, slaughtered the yawl.

It wasn't fear that took him, even now; but a sort of rage—a fighting madness that still had a clarity in it. To defeat this enemy he would have to breathe again—fight clear of the murderous rocks.

For a moment he actually did feel solid rock beneath one foot. He sprang and swam. He came to the surface of a falling hill of water and pumped in air for his stifled lungs and straining heart. He knew he'd have no time to spare. All during his sojourn on the Pacific Coast he'd been learning how to swim in the surf. And even in time of calm the rollers would come in along the

California shore higher than the bungalows that fringed the beach.

He was under again—then up. That there was a difference now, he could tell. The whole ocean was rolling over him at times, it seemed, with a current like that of Niagara. But the movement was no longer so savage.

After that the struggle was no longer so fierce. But it seemed to be everlasting. It was as if the sea, having caught him in a trap, having robbed him of his little ship, having made sure of him anyway, was now willing to kill him off with a degree of leisure.

BUT he wouldn't allow himself to be killed—that way or any way. There were periods when it almost seemed as if he'd been fighting on through his sleep—in a sort of nightmare—conscious of the nightmare but oblivious to the immediate circumstances. But fighting still—under water, breathing again, resting even now whenever the opportunity presented.

The darkness above the water seemed absolute. It was only in the water that there was any light—a burst of phosphorescent stars, streaks of light like watery lightning; and all this time the huge roar that could be almost like a deafening silence.

Out of one of his periods of exhaustion, Jimmy Cullen was shocked to full wakefulness and life by feeling himself brushed against what he took to be the mast of a sunken ship. The contact came just right, at the end of a surge; or he might have been crushed. Or again, if his awakening had been less abrupt, the chance might have passed.

But instantly he'd circled the timber with his arms and legs. With all that he had left of strength he climbed—then climbed again—while the rocking heave of the water and the pressure of the gale both tried to make him lose his hold.

It may have been seconds—or minutes—later when he recognized the nature of that leaning mast to which he clung. Then, little by little, the wonder revealed itself. This was no dead and man-shaped timber that had lent him a helping hand when he needed it most. He was clinging to the sloping trunk of a cocoanut tree.

Some time during the night, the wind went down. Then there was a rift in the clouds and there was a spangle of stars overhead as bright as moons. In the light of these he could see that there were other trees, and he began to get his bearings.

This wasn't a mere reef that had wrecked him—and saved him. This was an atoll—one of those wide circles of coral rock surrounding a lagoon. Most of the atolls in the dangerous archipelago—most of the atolls in the entire South Seas—rose but a few feet above the level of the ocean. Hurricanes, such as this one that was passing, were the abiding terror of them all.

STORM and water abating and the starlight giving him a better view of what his chances were, Jimmy Cullen eased himself down once more into the brine that had almost been his death. The surge now came no higher than his waist. When it sucked away the ground was bare.

A slight incline brought him to higher ground. He found a place where the wind had laid over two old palms side by side, making a shelf that the water didn't reach, and here he slept.

There was no immediate danger of his death by either thirst or starvation. That became clear, long before the sun was up. The ground

was covered by rifts of fallen cocoanuts. On the beach he found a segment of shell that was as hard as glass and as sharp as a razor—probably the sort of shell the natives in these parts used to shave with—and with this he cut through the tops of half a dozen green nuts and feasted like a king.

Back in America—and over much of the rest of the world—he reflected, better men than himself would be standing in breadlines. He pitied them. He couldn't pity himself. He had no fire. But if it came to that, he supposed, he could eat his fish raw. He'd learn how to catch them.

There was no trace of the yawl.

AS the sun came up, he scanned the world about him. The whole circle of the atoll now lay clear—a circle of coral as perfect, it appeared, as might have been drawn by a compass, surrounding a lagoon about a mile in diameter.

This was the lagoon through which he'd swam last night. At the time of the wreck he'd been swept directly over the barrier—not surprising, for much of it was a mere breakwater, rising but a foot or so above the surface and but a few feet wide. Against this the white surf pounded.

It was a miracle, in fact, that he hadn't been washed again out to sea, for there were many gaps in the fringe of cocoanuts and other growth. At its widest, the rim of the atoll couldn't have been more than a hundred yards in breadth.

The islet he was on—he later made out—was like the tip of a horn! and the horn was a chain of islands that curved off and appeared to widen off to the south and west.

"Dangerous!"

He recognized that conformation. On his charts he had studied it perhaps a thousand times. Or more—through endless days, through nights under the hurricane lamp in his little cabin.

And off there, somewhere to the south and west was, he knew, that larger and richer atoll of Nekaloa—an island ring surrounding a lagoon like a circular lake, ten miles in diameter; and in the center of this lake, an island that had been made into a sort of Garden of Eden, where the man he'd come so far to find was said to live like a king.

The sun lifted into a sky that was now cloudless; and the heat, while soft, was overpowering.

Cullen slept through most of the day. But even while he slept he was thinking, to some extent, of Bernard d'Orlaine and the problem of reaching him. The nearest atoll was all of five miles away. He might take a chance and try to swim it—in spite of sharks, of barracudas, of swordfish and of unguessed currents.

He was aroused along toward sunset by a distant sound of chanting and a throb of drums.

CHAPTER III

Forbidden Meat

THE SOUND was so deceptive at first that he feared it was just imagination—something conjured up by the beat of the distant surf and the stir of the stiff fronds of the cocoanuts. But some trick of the breeze brought him an unmistakable gust of voices. And, odd as this might seem, there was something about the voices that brought him the first real shiver of fear he'd known since setting out on this cruise.

Quickly as he could, he made for cover; then, keeping himself as much as possible out of sight, he headed away through the cocoanuts and lower growth—most of it stripped

and tangled by the storm—in the direction of the sound.

A fleet of canoes had already reached his island, he could see, and were headed into the lagoon through one of the openings in the reef. That they knew this place, was evident. There hadn't been enough water in that passage this morning to float a canoe. But the tide had risen.

ONE after one the canoes slipped through—first a big one, with a flash of thirty or forty paddles, then a flock of smaller ones. With the big canoe still leading, they headed straight across the lagoon, drums going and perhaps a hundred or more voices chanting.

The chanting and the drums were pretty regular—quick and eager—and to Cullen they all seemed to be saying the same thing. What the thing was they were saying he could so far only suspect. It was one of those things that people in remote parts of the world have read about and heard about all their lives—as he had—and practically without a tremor. On the contrary, making it a subject for jokes.

But this was no joke.

The leading canoe came into shallow water near the shore of the lagoon and instantly the paddlers were overboard and running the canoe up on the beach. The canoe might have weighed a ton or more, yet the canoemen handled it like a toy.

Not one of them, it appeared, could have been much less than six feet tall—all of them tall and black, with huge mops of frizzly hair that added to their height; and beautifully built; naked except for a vast variety of ornaments and painted designs on their faces and bodies.

Then, as the other canoes were beached, the men of the leading canoe began to take from it what they'd brought as cargo—one limp human body after another.

At first Cullen thought that this human freight must have been either drugged or was already dead, it appeared so helpless and unresisting. Then he felt a surge of heat and a sickening heart action as he began to see better and to understand. There was a reason why none of the cargo resisted, although there was no evidence that any of the victims had been bound.

They didn't use ropes or irons in this part of the world to keep their prisoners from running away. They simply broke their legs.

Cullen dug himself a little deeper into the sand where he lay. But he understood the movement. It was more of an anchorage he was seeking than a better hiding place. It was all he could do to keep from leaping to his feet, shouting a protest, flinging himself against this unholy band.

BUT what could he do single-handed? He didn't even have a knife. The only weapon he had of any kind was that blade of shell he'd picked up this morning on the beach. And these cannibals were armed. Everywhere there was a display of spears and knives, of axes and old ceremonial clubs.

Yet the spirit of the affair seemed to be that of a picnic. These people were preparing for a feast.

For a time there'd been no more drumming, and the chanting had broken up into shouts of laughter and general speech. While the living cargo from the big canoe was still being brought out and tossed aside in a disordered row along the beach, others of the prospective feasters were starting a fire. They'd brought their own fuel along—they weren't taking chances with water-soaked cocoanut husks and brush—

for the flames shot up at once with brilliant heat.

There was one man—Cullen noted—who appeared to be in charge of the party. He did no work. He was huge, superb in his bearing, and more richly decorated than the rest.

EACH of his arms, midway between elbow and shoulder, was tightly bound with beaded bracelets, and in these had been thrust a yard-long cluster of bird-of-paradise skins.

There were similar beads and feathered pendants from his knees. His bushy head was like a flower garden and half of his face had been painted a bright vermillion.

The others feared him. He strutted about. But he also appeared to be in good humor—the easy boss on a gala occasion. Then someone asked him a question and he gave his answer sharply. At once the questioner and a comrade ran back to the big canoe and brought out a final bit of cargo that had been left there.

Cullen gave a silent gasp. He stared. He saw that he couldn't be mistaken. This final prisoner was a white man. Bound, this time, Cullen saw.

That was something to be grateful for—perhaps! His legs hadn't been broken—yet!

It may have been some word or gesture of the black chief—it may have been some look in the white prisoner's face—that touched the fire to the slumbering dynamite in Cullen's heart and mind.

But suddenly he was on his feet, that inadequate shell knife of his in his hand.

There was but a single chance, he knew, of saving that white prisoner down there—or, for that matter, of saving his own life either. And the single chance was that of taking the enemy by surprise. Only, it wasn't logic that was guiding him now. It was instinct.

He'd let out some sort of a wild cry, he didn't know what. And before the cry was completed he'd jumped forward and was flinging himself down the beach toward that mob of armed savages.

Wow! What was this?

As he ran, he saw a gust of panic strike across the painted faces turned in his direction. Eyes were staring. Mouths were agape over black and pointed teeth.

These savages knew this atoll, and now, how could this strange white man be here unless he'd come up from the sea or had dropped from the sky?

If he was a white man! More likely he was a demon—the ghost of someone they had murdered at this place before!

ONLY the big cannibal chief seemed to have kept his senses—or to have recovered them quickly enough to meet the situation. He had hesitated but an instant. Then he'd snatched an ax from the hand of one of his awe-struck warriors standing near him, and this ax the black giant swung up for a blow at the fair-haired stranger.

From the first, it was the chief that Cullen had kept in the center of his line of vision, so to speak. He was seeing all things, just then, to right and left.

But flinging himself at top speed down the slope of sand, he was headed for the chief.

Just as that murderous ax went up, Cullen stabbed with his razor-edged bit of shell and thrust up his left hand to block the fall of the ax.

Against his own body Cullen felt a smear of hot blood.

CHAPTER IV

As to Bully Finch

THIS FIRST encounter was over so swiftly—the triumph of the stranger over the chief was so swift and complete—that another spasm of panic now caught the cannibal band. There was something about their fear—and this fear mingled with an obvious fierceness and native courage—that suggested a panic of lions and tigers, or of black leopards, rather than that of panic-stricken human beings.

The savages had sprung away. And even their spring was beastlike. They'd bunched to some extent. But they were on the prowl. They held their weapons in readiness, and yet they showed no immediate intention of using them.

Cullen had seized the ax from the hand of the chief, just as the black giant was folding up. His knees had failed him. He lay there now on the ground at Cullen's feet almost in an attitude of obeisance.

From back of him, Cullen heard a strangled cry in English:

"Hey! Quick! For the love o' God!"

Cullen turned to the white prisoner who lay on the beach—an elderly man, bearded and gray. His hands and feet were tied. His back was bent.

"Cut me these here bonds," the old man quavered. "And look alive, now!"

Cullen was over him in an instant. It was with the sharp edge of the ax that the coir strings were sawed apart. The cocoanut fiber was as hard as iron, and while he worked—swiftly, desperately—Cullen kept an eye on those milling man-eaters.

"They won't tech you," the old man cried. His voice was an odd combination of snarl and whine. His language was rich in curses and unprintable words. "You're taboo," he said to Cullen. "You're smeared with the blood of their chief. Give me a hand. I'll show you!"

Stiffly, yet with a certain ferocious energy, the old man got to his knees and then to his feet. All he wore was shirt and trousers, and for the moment he was like a shaggy old gray gorilla standing there.

But he'd stood for a second only, then he'd trotted, bent and flat-footed, to the fallen chief and scooped a handful of blood from his side. Without hesitation, he smeared this across his own forehead, then turned and howled a harangue at the wild islanders.

Cullen could follow scarcely anything that the old fellow said. He was speaking in some jargon of Kanaka and Pidgin English—giving them hell, talking like a crazy man. And looking like a crazy man with his wild gray hair and beard and that smear of blood across his forehead.

The Kanakas listened, fierce and staring, but with their weapons still hanging useless in their hands. And next the old man turned and spat on the Kanaka chief—who may have been dead or not yet dead—then kicked the fallen leader.

"Don't!" said Cullen.

"Don't!" the old man echoed with surprise. "Don't, is it? And who be you to say 'Don't!' to Bully Finch?"

IT was Cullen's turn now to stare at the old man in front of him as the natives were staring at him—as the natives, for that matter, were staring at them both.

"You Bully Finch?" Cullen asked in amazement.

"Who else but Bully Finch?"

"I thought Bully Finch was dead."

"Oh, you did, did you?"

They stood there looking at each

other. It was only for a pair of seconds, but the time was long enough so far as Jimmy Cullen was concerned.

And there, during that brief interval, Cullen had the whiff of a ghastly regret—almost a regret—that he hadn't allowed the black fellows to have their way with this dreadful old man.

ALL in that pair of seconds there had come whisking through his mind the hundred atrocity stories he had heard and read concerning this most famous of all modern South Seas pirates who was Bully Finch.

The stories were enough to chill the blood of any normal man—of black-birding, of prosperous islands devastated, of murdered traders and stolen women, of ships burned at sea and their crews either butchered in cold blood or set adrift in mid-ocean without food or water.

But most of all and worst of all was that story of his father's death coupled with the death—or the reported death—of Bully Finch. It was as if to say that the original Jim Cullen and Bully Finch were of the same breed, and that in killing the one, Bernard d'Orlaine had done a similar good work in killing the other.

"I read it in the papers," said Cullen; "long ago, that Bernard d'Orlaine killed you and killed—"

"Jim Cullen?"

"Yes—at the same time."

"Might I ask," the old man demanded, with sudden cunning, "who you be?"

But before Cullen could answer, or make up his mind what he ought to answer, the old man turned swiftly and was howling curses and commands once more at the islanders. These were now showing confusion. Some appeared to be for yielding, some for starting a fight.

As for Cullen, he stood alert and watchful. He knew that he was in one of those situations where life hangs as if suspended on a single thread—a thread as fragile as the strand of a spider's web—when neither flight nor fight were possible.

But now, obviously in response to something that Bully Finch had said, one of the black stalwarts skipped over to where one of the prisoners with the broken legs was lying on the beach. In an instant the savage had brought down a sacrificial club. There was a crash of bone.

"Stop 'em!" Cullen roared.

HE jumped toward the old man and seized him by the shoulder. Cullen even now had his ax half-uplifted. But the old man screeched an oath and fumbled in his shirt. To Cullen's amazement, when the hand came in sight again, it held a revolver. The revolver was against Cullen's breast. There was murder in the old man's eye.

"Unhand me, you beach-scum!" the old man panted. "Didn't I tell you jest now that I was Bully Finch? Loose me! If you hadn't cut me free just now you'd be dead and on the fire!"

"You told them to kill that poor wretch?"

"Sure I did! I know Kanaks. These fellows want their meat!"

Cullen felt a wave of sickness that might have overpowered him. But he was saved by rage—rage that was cold.

Suddenly he had stepped aside. At the same instant—without shifting his eyes from the old man's eyes—he'd snatched the revolver from the pirate's hand. He backed away a step. It took but a glance at the gun to see that it was in good condition and loaded—an old six-gun, as they used to call them in Texas;

but with the barrel sawed off almost back to the cylinder.

Bully Finch was staring at him.

"Son," said the old pirate with a sudden meekness and a tremolo in his voice, "tell me honest. There was never but one other man who took a gun off me like that. His name was Captain Jim Cullen. Do you happen to be any kin of his?"

CHAPTER V

Pearls

"THAT'S a question that maybe I'll answer and maybe I won't," said Cullen. "But I'll tell you this: I'm giving orders here at present. And at the slightest indication of your trying to double-cross me in any way, I'll kill you."

"You're Jim Cullen's boy," the old man said.

"Stow that," said Cullen, "until we get this picnic straightened out. You're my interpreter, and you'd better make it straight. Tell that war party they can stay here and eat their chief, if they want to. I'm going to take their big canoe and their prisoners—you included. I'll want enough unarmed paddlers to man the boat."

"They'll foller us and kill us."

"No, they won't."

"How so?"

"Because I'm burning all the other canoes. Now talk."

Cold nerve, then luck, and also—there could be no doubt about it—the eagerness of some of these warriors to be at their unholy feasting, had seen that wild proposition of Cullen's through. And, after all, he was "master"—with a gun, an ax and the taboo of the fallen chief's blood still painted in a darkened smear on his side.

He would have washed the abomination off at once had he not yielded to the almost prayerful entreaties of old Bully Finch. The old pirate kept his own smear across his forehead until the last of the cannibal Kanaks were out of sight.

This party, so Bully Finch recounted, was from one of the outlying islands called Mahuku. They were supposed to be pure Maoris of the old stock—they looked like it from their build; but they also had some of the darker blood in them. In any case, they were generally feared by the other islanders of the dangerous group — wild enough though all of these other islanders were themselves. And it was a consideration of this fact that had brought Bully Finch to select Mahuku as headquarters when he'd come back to the islands a month ago.

Where had he been?

"Well, I'll tell you where I've been," said Bully Finch, with his wicked small eyes again gimleting the face of Jimmy Cullen. "Fer the past ten years I've been rottin' in prison under a false name."

"Why the false name?"

"They'd have killed me if they'd suspected who I was."

"What brought you back?"

The old pirate held his breath for a spell. He exploded the breath softly in a single word:

"Pearls!"

And in that word he was putting, it seemed, all the concentrated passion, hopes, dreams—and perhaps the only love, as well—of a wasted lifetime.

PEARLS to the South Seas what ivory had been to Africa: a source of wealth to the few, a curse to the many.

They'd got away from the cursed atoll in the middle of the morning.

It was the blue of early night when they brought the last of the crippled prisoners—three of them—

into a small lagoon and hailed a hidden village called Maru-Maru. And here, true to his promise, Cullen sent the Mahuku paddlers back with their big canoe. They'd been paddling hard all day, but they were off again like shriven ghosts while the Maru-Maru villagers shouted rejoicings.

Torches were flaming everywhere, then a great bonfire on the beach.

"They'll be wantin' to make you king," said Bully Finch. He paused, while his gimlet eyes tried to tap Cullen's thought. Then he added: "Instead of Barney d'Orlaine."

THERE was to be no sleep in the village of Maru-Maru this night, the old pirate said. "Big fella singing he come up!" Half of what the old fellow said was in the "pidgin" of the islands, and the other half was richly spiced with native words and unmentionable oaths. But he knew his natives.

They would have made Cullen their king this night. They'd already put at his disposition the biggest house in the place and made it known that whatever else they had —animate or inanimate—was his for the simple taking.

But all that Cullen would take, at that, was the company of Bully Finch into his big clean house after the two of them had dined.

And there, by the light of a hurricane lamp, which was one of the great treasures of the village, the two of them sat down face to face and talked.

"You've spoken of pearls," said Cullen, "and you've spoken about Barney d'Orlaine."

"And I've also spoken," the old man reminded, in his breathless manner, "of Captain Jimmy Cullen."

"Go on!"

"You're Captain Jimmy Cullen's son."

"I am. Will you tell me how you know?"

"First of all, by the way you acted today. Then, I just put two and two together. Do you suppose the islands wouldn't hear about it when a son of Captain Jimmy Cullen started out to cruise the Pacific alone? And where else would the young feller be headed for but to get back his share of his father's pearls?"

"You knew about that?"

"Yes. Me especially. And one other."

"Who?"

"You know who. The man who murdered your old man. And who'd get you murdered, just as he had it fixed to get rid of me."

"D'Orlaine?"

"Yes."

"But why?"

AGAIN Bully Finch held his breath, and again he exploded that puff of a word as if there was magic in it.

"Pearls! Pearls! The sweetest treasure in the world. They're soft and light. They're easy to carry. They're the one sure thing in the world that women'll go crazy for. What are diamonds beside 'em? Shiny glass! Why, somewheres in London or South Africa they got whole roomsful of diamonds—hoardin' of them there jest to keep the value up. But there never have been enough pearls in the world. There won't never will be."

The old man held silent for a time while he continued to look at Jimmy Cullen with his deep-set eyes. The sounds of drums and chanting, of clapping hands, of laughter and an occasional frenzied howl surged in from the beach where the natives were making carnival.

"They might be eatin' you tomorrow," said Bully Finch, "as easy as

tonight they'd be makin' you king if Barney d'Orlaine told 'em they could. You see what he had those Mahuku niggers do to me."

"How did he get his power?"

"The same way I got mine—when I had it. But I lost mine. He didn't. Power's like money. Some can keep it. Some can't. Them that can, they keep on pilin' it up until they die or bust or go crazy. D'Orlaine, he's gone crazy—sets in, now and then, with the natives at a feed of long pig—"

The old man suddenly straightened and stared at something back of Cullen. Instinctively Cullen ducked aside, and as he did so, a cold breath, like the breath of death itself, fanned his cheek.

CHAPTER VI

Death In the Night

A THROWING-SPEAR, with a long polished black handle, quivered in one of the log columns near which Cullen was seated, the iron point of it buried deep in the wood. But Cullen hadn't waited for more than a glimpse of the thing that had so nearly killed him. More than half-naked as he was, rested and refreshed, with that murderous old six-gun he'd taken from Bully Finch practically under his hand, he was up and out of the building almost quicker than thought.

There was no moon. But the sky was clear. The darkness was no more than a sort of blue translucence.

No one was in sight from the front of the house.

Cullen rounded it. Even as he was doing so he was aware that the Maru-Maru people themselves could have had no hand in this effort at assassination. The drums and the laughter were still sounding from the beach. Over in that direction, the fires were leaping higher than ever.

The conviction that this had been the work of strangers was confirmed as he saw a dozen shadowy figures making off through the scattered cocoanut trees in a direction away from the fires.

Immediately, without calling out, he started in pursuit, slipping far over toward the outer shore of the atoll-reef where the roll of the surf would cover any noise he might make.

Those he followed didn't run far. At first he thought that he had lost them. Then he saw them grouped and crouching, looking back in the direction from which they'd come.

Cullen crept closer. He bitterly regretted it now that he'd not taken the time to learn at least one or two of the local dialects, then pidgin—that Talk-Boy speech, as they called it which was the one universal sort of speech throughout this island world.

BUT he'd scarcely crept a quarter of the way that separated him from the band when he heard the familiar accent of an English word—unprintable, like so much of the island speech.

The speaker, whoever he was, then called someone a liar and a coward.

Cullen strained forward, yet eager to miss no word.

"Go back, I tell you, you bludy beggars, and kill 'em both. Bring me their heads, I tell you!"

There was a murmur of protest—almost of supplication, it seemed. Several were speaking at once, but there was a peculiar accent to their speech that made it impossible to understand them even though they also might have been speaking in a sort of English.

He who'd spoken out at first be-

came more insistent. His voice came in a subdued whine that was like the muted growl of a dangerous animal.

"Their heads, damn you! Not a cent will you get unless you bring me their heads."

THERE was a murmur from the shadowy group, then a movement that might have meant that the mob was about to scatter. Cullen didn't hesitate. To have hesitated now might have meant the death of old Bully Finch, and however much the old pirate might have deserved it, he'd fallen, to some extent, under Cullen's protection.

"Stand still, everybody!"

Cullen's voice came clear and crisp. But he'd not foreseen the effect of his order. He might as well have spoken to a pack of wolves. In a moment they were scattering. But in that same moment Cullen had run among them.

At first the conspirators must have believed that they'd been surrounded. There was no concerted movement in any one direction—just confusion. In the midst of this confusion, Cullen saw the flash of a gun. But at the same instant he himself had fired.

There was but a single report—it was one of those moments when a lot of things seem to be happening at once—and Cullen almost fell as a stab of pain scraped his side.

Two more shots—there may have been others. But Cullen had fired twice again—once as a towering black shape rushed him with an upraised club, again at someone whom he recognized as white or nearly white—and he guessed that this was he who'd been bargaining for his head.

In any case, it was this white man who'd fired. He seemed to be the only one in the gang who'd had a gun.

Cullen found it suddenly convenient to slump against a tree. He'd been hit all right. But he was holding himself in hand in case of further fighting.

On the ground near him were two figures, one of them still and the other not so still. The former was that of the islander who'd rushed him with a club. Dead. Cullen knew where that shot had gone. It had taken the clubber through the heart. The other figure was that of the white man—or of the man who was nearly white. He was crawling about on his hands and knees—groaning, cursing, even sobbing a little.

All the others had fled.

AND just then, it was as if a curse of silence had fallen over the party on the beach. There'd been a sudden stoppage of drums and voices at that first bark of a gun. And now it looked as if a torchlight procession was headed in this direction—a crazy procession that zigzagged and wavered, retreated, came ahead.

So much, then Cullen heard a familiar voice. Old Bully Finch was there.

"Cullen! Cullen!"

"Here!" Cullen answered.

"We got to git out o' here," the old man panted.

"What's the hurry?"

"Can't you hear them villagers? They're long-long—they're crazy. They've got word from d'Orlaine—"

He stopped as he saw the man who was crawling on the ground. He must have guessed at once that the man was badly hurt and that he was some sort of an enemy. The old sinner had passed most of his life in scenes like this.

His action was typical. It was as

if he'd taken on a new lease of breath and strength. He'd run forward at a stoop and kicked the crawler in the side, rolling him over.

"Kong Binny!" he exclaimed, and he let out a whine of laughter that sounded like the devil's own. "So I got you, at last!"

And once more the old man raised his bare but horny foot.

"Stop it!" Cullen panted, forcing himself forward. "He's wounded and so am I. Where in hell are we to go—if we have to go?"

There was a moment's flurry of delay. Kong Binny—which was equivalent, in pidgin, to calling him "Chinese" Binny—had, it appeared, been looking for his gun, and now Bully Finch saw it first.

The old pirate scrambled down and seized that murder tool as an old miser would have scrambled for a piece of gold. Bully was on his knees at the side of Kong Binny and seemed inclined to kill him there.

But Kong Binny, also a quick actor it seemed in a jam like this, spoke up.

"Stow it, Cap," he said. "I go along." The promise seemed to be insufficient. He added one that was overwhelming. "Cap—listen!—so help me God!—I'll show you how to get those pearls!"

Bully Finch half-turned to Cullen.

"Son," he said, "suppose you stay here!"

"Drop that gun," ordered Cullen, "or I'll kill you both!"

CHAPTER VII

Island Wireless

"OLD man Cullen's boy," Bully Finch muttered, as he dropped the gun he'd just picked up. It was as if he were defending himself in the eyes of Kong Binny for yielding so quickly to this stranger.

Cullen recovered the gun and shoved it into the hip pocket of his overalls. The other weapon he continued to hold in readiness. There was no telling—as Kong Binny himself broke in, just then—what would happen next.

CULLEN took a moment to watch the zigzagging of the torchlight parade.

"Those Kanaks are frightened," said Bully Finch. "But they'll kill us." He peered up at Cullen from his crouch. "They're as bad as the Mahukus when they're roused."

The old man's words brought back to Cullen's mind a picture of what had happened earlier this day. He trusted the islanders as much as he did these two men. He was wounded—how badly he could only guess. He was, it seemed, caught between the jaws of a steel trap, and each jaw set on killing him. But in the background was the trapper himself—the man he'd come so far to find: Bernard d'Orlaine.

Cullen turned to Kong Binny.

"Can you get us away from here?"

"Yes."

"Then, come on."

And the three of them—each of whom had menaced the life of the other less than a minute ago—were heading away through the grove, then through a tangle of hibiscus and other growth, following the curve of the lagoon, yet keeping away from the beach.

"Pearls!" breathed Bully Finch.

There were two canoes lying in a break through the circular reef of the atoll and here there was a shadowy, shifting group of those Kanakas that Kong Binny had brought with him on his head hunt.

Kong Binny had been right in at least one of the things he'd said

during that strange flight of theirs through the cocoanuts and brush. His men had been afraid to run off and leave him. There was some queer hint of both weakness and power about the half-breed that held Cullen's interest—that even aroused in him a certain feeling of friendliness.

KONG BINNY himself had been wounded twice. He'd lost two fingers from his pistol hand. That was how he'd come to drop his gun. He'd taken another bullet, he said, through the shoulder. But he treated both of these wounds as of little account.

He was a smallish man, but wiry and hard, dressed in a loose dark shirt and khaki trousers. What Cullen could see of his face, in the blue gloom of the stars, was a mask that might have been molded in porcelain, except for the wide-set, gleaming black eyes.

Cullen spoke to him.

"Put Bully Finch in one canoe," he said, "and tell your men they'd better deliver him safe at the end of the passage. You and I'll go in the other canoe. I'll tell you now, at the first hint of trouble I'm apt to crack you up."

"Perfectly, Captain Cullen," said the Kong.

With the perfect canoe craft of the islands, the boats were run out into the open sea. There was a surge, then a dip, and they were across a barrier of breakers without having shipped a cupful of water.

Cullen had Kong Binny seated just in front of him, where there would be no chance for crooked play. The Kong's back, moreover, was to the paddlers and their backs were to him.

"At the same time," said Cullen, when the boats leveled out, "you go along with me and you'll find I'll go along with you."

WHITE man's radio had spread to only a part of the hundred thousand islands of the South Seas. But since the days of Adam, it seems, there'd always been an older wireless in use—some of which the white man himself understood and some of which he didn't.

Drum-talk, of course, as old and highly developed and capable of covering great spaces as the talking drums of Africa. Then signal smokes—not so good in the low islands, where the surf itself is apt to send up misleading signals in the smoke of pounded water. Sun flashes from shell mirrors.

There must have been other ways by the white man unsuspected.

According to most reports, Barney d'Orlaine was only about three-quarters white—the white part from an ancient French line, running back to the days of those great explorers of the South Seas, Dampierre and Bougainville; then, that remaining quarter of his blood from a line of island queens—the oldest royalty in the world, so some believe.

A king, anyway—that was what d'Orlaine believed himself to be. And in some cases, at any rate, if you believe it, it's so. This was such a case. A king in every way, with power of life and death, power to take and keep what he wanted; with a king's pride; with even a royal palace of sorts.

The house was one that had been built originally for a French governor of this part of the world. But a thousand miles, more or less, from Papeete—"Paris of the Pacific!" No governor could stand for that, especially if he was Paris-bred. And the house for a long time became no better than a pirates' roost. A dreadful place; haunted with the ghosts

of a thousand abominations, embalmed in hardened gin and blood.

D'Orlaine had been a pirate on his own, according to report.

Almost before he'd begun to shave he'd killed his man. Perhaps the man deserved it. But, in this case, he happened to be d'Orlaine's superior officer on a French cruiser. So d'Orlaine perforce must jump his ship and go on the beach.

Killing wasn't so hard, and there were plenty of men in the South Seas ships and shore-front joints of those days calling loudly on eternal justice to send a killer along. D'Orlaine was that killer, for twenty or even thirty such, they say—riffraff, pirates, blackbirders, so-called honest merchants who were robbing the natives.

For a long time he gunned also for the famous Bully Finch—and was supposed to have got him, too, since Bully eventually disappeared.

But, by this time, d'Orlaine wasn't going in so much for murder any more. Murder, was, so to speak, his first love. But the second was the strongest, and this was his love for pearls.

It was generally understood that the man who'd introduced him to this love was Captain James Cullen, master and owner of the pearling schooner *Malolei*.

There was hardly a lagoon in the South Pacific where "shell" existed that didn't know the *Malolei*. And in many a lagoon it was kill or get killed, and Captain James Cullen kept out of range until after he formed a partnership with Bernard d'Orlaine.

HAD they quarreled about pearls as some men will quarrel about a beautiful woman? Had it been a duel or an assassination?

But all the old scenes, and perhaps some of these very questions, must have returned to Bernard d'Orlaine this day when he stepped out onto the veranda of his island castle and caught some beat of the island wireless.

At last! At last! The son of the man he'd killed had come to seek him out.

CHAPTER VIII

Nekaloa

BERNARD D'ORLAINE was the fine figure of a man as he stood there on the veranda of his house—powerful, well set-up, scarcely looking his forty years.

There was nothing of the beachcomber or the pirate about him, whatever his past might have been. He was dressed more like a country squire than an islander of the South Seas. But there was that hint of tragedy about him, just the same, that one finds so often among the men who live on the fringes of the world. Also some hint of madness—perhaps.

He raised his swarthy, dark-eyed face and listened. Out of space, out of the blue, there came a slow throbbing with a curious tempo. It was very faint. It might have been the fluttering of a loose palmfrond to one less accustomed to hearing messages not meant for the ears of outsiders.

The message died away.

He stood there brooding. From where he stood he could look away far out over a sheet of water so still, so opalescent, that itself it might have been an infinite sheet of nacre.

This was the great lagoon of his island, Nekaloa. This house of his stood on a hill at the center of the lagoon, in the midst of a flowering and fruit-heavy jungle from which a scent came up of a thousand perfumes intermingled.

FAR away—out across this garden, out across the lagoon—there ran the wide arc of the atoll barrier—one of the largest and richest of the South Seas, but too remote, too beset by danger, for ships to come this way except on the most extraordinary occasions.

Maybe there was such a thing in the world as too much beauty. Men were weakened by it. Because of it, men went crazy.

"Pearls!" d'Orlaine breathed. "So Cullen's boy has reached the islands after all—come to claim his father's share!"

He reflected for a long time, he felt almost tempted to send out word that the boy should be taken care of, welcomed, brought with honor to Nekaloa. Last year—even last month—he might have done so. He was getting old. He was so tired of beauty that he sometimes almost wished that he could be sent to prison, exiled to the slums, so that he could yearn for beauty—and exult in it—kill people for the sake of it—as he'd once been willing to do.

He'd thought about that—of sending for the son of Captain James Cullen, that one-time partner of his, and his rival for possession of some of the most beautiful pearls in the world—and then telling the boy:

"Here they are! Take them! But I may kill you to get them back again!"

Bernard d'Orlaine laughed. And there was a touch of madness in his laugh so chill, so penetrant, that a servant in an adjoining room hastened noiselessly away on his unshod feet.

Again silence settled about the lone figure on the veranda. He'd been so jealous of his treasure that he'd driven practically the entire world out of his life—except this world—his world—which was a pearl in itself.

No more ships—no more pirates even—no more raiders—nor prating missionaries—nor thieving traders! He was king!

Each year, it was true, he sent the government quota of pearls to the capital at Papeete. But the governor over there was a fool. Or else he knew nothing of pearls, which was equivalent to the same thing.

Those pearls he sent away to the government were trash—worth a million or so, perhaps; but trash compared with the pearls he kept.

Every year one or two—sometimes three—great and perfect pearls came up from the scattered lagoons. And these were his. He had his spies everywhere. His spies knew all the secrets of the old-time inter-island wireless, used by their ancestors long, long before the white man ever came.

SUDDENLY he raised his head. He was listening again. Through the blue crystal of the air there came a faint throbbing in another cadence. It may have been a drum. It may have been but the tapping of a bird on a dead limb. Yet the message had a meaning for d'Orlaine.

He clapped his hands and stood staring out over the limitless expanse of ocean beyond the reef.

The servant appeared just back of him in perfect silence. The king of Nekaloa didn't turn to see whether his summons had been obeyed. But d'Orlaine knew that the servant would be there. He spoke softly to the man in the local dialect.

"A ship is coming," he said. "The ship is bringing a girl—a woman. She may get here tonight. See, anyway, that the east room is made ready. Make it bright with flowers and water—everything. Do you need further instructions?"

"No, master!"

"Wait!"

The servant remained silent and motionless—a lean-faced man with dark face and a shaven crown. He was dressed in a spotless tunic without sleeves and a lavalava which was also white and spotless.

Bernard d'Orlaine stood there meditating.

His existence had been discovered by a niece in Paris. He'd had the weakness to respond when she wrote to him. Now she was coming out to see him—her uncle!

What did she think he was? A planter? A nice old man? She'd find out! Perhaps she'd found out already! She'd been forced to wait over in Tahiti for a while waiting until a schooner would bring her out to Nekaloa. She'd probably learned enough. And still she was willing to come. What did she want? His pearls?

He'd rather see them go to the son of James Cullen—Cullen who'd found and kept the twelve perfect rose pearls—the most perfect pearls in the world!

"But the boy," said d'Orlaine, half-aloud, still speaking in the native dialect which was his familiar form of expression, "he's coming to try for them anyway—to kill me—to take them—"

"My master?"

D'ORLAINE had forgotten the servant.

"I've had word of a young white robber named Cullen," said the king of Nekaloa. "He heads for here from Maru-Maru. Tell the drummers. I want him stopped. Maybe I'll talk to him. Maybe not."

"Yes, master!"—and once more Noni, the servant, ghosted away.

What he did—or did not do—in the matter of killing Captain James Cullen's boy would after all—so ran d'Orlaine thought—depend a lot on what he might first decide to do with this niece of his.

Was she beautiful? Then he might decide even to marry her—add her, so to speak, to his collection of pearls—for a time.

Had she heard too much about his past? In that case he might have to kill her anyway.

His mad thoughts ran on in a curious pattern woven of beauty, of murder and of retribution—good or bad—to a dead man out of his past.

Far over to the west a speck had appeared on the horizon. That would be the schooner bringing Morgane Lille, that niece of his.

Was she coming to her death? Was she bringing death to others? And if so, to whom?

CHAPTER IX

The Gleaming Curse

IT WAS as if Bernard d'Orlaine felt the need of consulting some secret oracle concerning those questions and uncertainties that were now beating in his heart and mind. He stood there a while longer, while an inner storm cast dark reflections across his handsome face. He then turned and re-entered the house.

There were many servants about this royal residence of Nekaloa, but so far as possible they kept themselves out of sight.

The white king of Nekaloa now walked alone through a number of rooms—rooms that were clean and fragrant, but in which there was an odd mixture of native and European wares. Old furniture imported from France, now faded and worn, stained and battered paintings of men and ships, a grand piano with a pile of yellowed music scattered over the top of it. But at the side of the piano were native drums and harps. The floor was covered with a carpet of woven seaweed. Native furni-

ture and grass and feather work were strewn about indiscriminately with the products of Europe.

THROUGH each room that d'Orlaine passed he cast a questioning glance about him. He'd found this home sufficient now for twenty years. Was he going to have to change it all? Better that this niece of his should die than cause him all this trouble. Better that the son of Captain Jim Cullen die.

But he didn't know. He couldn't tell. He would have to consult his oracle.

He came into a room of his house that served him as a study. It was here that he passed most of his waking hours. It was here that he generally slept.

It was a room forbidden to all except himself and Noni, the servant.

Yet a voice hailed him as he entered—a voice that was friendly, chuckling, and yet with a sly note of mockery in it.

"Hello, there, Cap!" it said. "Want a pearl?"

There was a large parrot sitting in a hoop suspended from the ceiling at the center of the room. The bird, having spoken, now began to rock on its perch and mutter to itself.

"Hello, Coco," the king of Nekaloa answered, as he might have replied to some valued human friend.

He valued the bird, all right—as a guardian, if not as a friend. Let anyone but d'Orlaine himself or his trusted servant Noni approach this place and the parrot would scream—scream curses in English, French, Spanish. And even when Noni was in the room, the servant could feel that the parrot was watching him. Coco the parrot trusted no native, not even Noni.

Coco was feared by the native about equally with his master. Secretly they were regarded as about equal, anyway. Often, far into the night, bird and white man could be heard talking together, screaming, laughing, cursing.

Swinging on his perch, the parrot chuckled softly, then muttered again, and now it was repeating one word over and over again:

"Pearls! Pearls! Pearls!"

It switched to French:

"Perles! Perles!"

The word struck an echo from Bernard d'Orlaine's mind, it seemed.

"Oui!" he himself muttered. *"Des perles! Des perles!"*

He went over to the single window of the room and dropped a sort of Venetian blind that had been fashioned there of slats and twine. The room was in a sudden dusk, and now the parrot was silent and watchful.

ONLY d'Orlaine spoke—his voice a whisper.

"Des perles!"

There was a tin lamp on a table in the center of the room, almost under the hoop where the parrot swung. D'Orlaine lit the lamp and drew up a worn old steamer chair. But he seemed to feel that even yet he could not trust himself to confront that secret oracle of his. Or was he merely increasing his joy in some passion by stifling it yet a little longer?

He went over to a cabinet and brought out a tumbler and a bottle. Into the tumbler he poured a stout drink of cognac. From a bunch of green cocoanuts on the floor he picked up one and skillfully notched a gash in one end of it through which the milky water was tapped into the glass.

He drank deeply. And thus fortified he turned to a steel filing cabinet.

Even now he wasn't ready to look

at the treasure he had come to see. First, he carefully pressed slightly out of place two steel rims that held the top of the cabinet in place, and this permitted him to tilt up the top sufficiently for him to thrust in his hand and make various adjustments before he was ready to pull open the upper drawer of the cabinet.

Yet this upper drawer opened as easily as the trigger of an infernal machine, in fact, for into such a machine this innocent-looking filing cabinet had been transformed.

At the slightest touch of an inexperienced hand, there would be a detonation like that of a Zeppelin bomb.

For a long time still, d'Orlaine stood there contemplating the mechanism and the charge of this invention of his. Would he himself grow careless or forgetful some day and thus find annihilation here with the treasure that would be annihilated with him?

At last, still carefully, slowly and tenderly, he pulled open a middle drawer and took from it an old tobacco pouch. His hands were trembling now.

THE pouch was filled with a sort of silken down taken from the pods of a local plant.

One by one, from this nest of down, Bernard d'Orlaine took perhaps a dozen pearls, each of them a splendid thing, large as a pigeon egg, and perfectly matched. These he clutched in his left hand and held them for a time against his heart. But as he did so, he stood at the open drawer and gazed down at a collection of still other pearls as existed nowhere else in the world, perhaps.

There arose from the open drawer a sheen and a glitter, a play of light. Material there for the adornment of a hundred queens. Bought at the price of no one would ever know how many lives—men drowned, killed by sharks, dead of the heart disease caused by diving, in wholesale killings during pearling raids and interisland wars.

His, now; all his!

But these were the greatest treasure—the twelve great pearls he now held clutched to his heart. He appeared to stagger a little as he shuffled back to his old steamer chair and eased himself into it before opening his hand again. He thrust his fist under the lamp he had lit and then slowly spread his fingers. The pearls caught the reflection of the lamp and it was as if the hand of Bernard d'Orlaine held a fragment of rainbow.

No wonder that men had died—and would continue to die—for a treasure like this. No! He could never give them up. He'd never give them up. He'd see the whole world dead and rotten first!

Noni, the native servant, had crept soundless to the window. He stood there watching his master with spellbound eyes.

CHAPTER X

Dog Eat Dog

KONG BINNY, the porcelain-faced half-breed, had been telling Jimmy Cullen about this confidential servant of the White King of Nekaloa.

"Noni," he said. "His name is Noni. And"—he let his voice sink to the barest whisper—"I got a Kanak right here in this canoe where we're sitting now who could pass himself off for Noni—long enough at least—to pull the necessary trick."

"What's the necessary trick?"

"Slit d'Orlaine's throat—the same as he did to your old man."

"Are you sure he did it?"

"I was there."

And while Jimmy Cullen held still, gripping the gunwales of the canoe to stop the itching in his arms to shoot the man in front of him, Kong Binny recited the story of the murder as he might have recounted the killing of a fish.

"It was on a night like this," he said. "And the three of us were in a native canoe, just as we are now, with a bunch of Kanaks at the paddles. Only it was your old man and Barny d'Orlaine who were sitting here in the stern. Me, I was up in the bow, and those Kanaks between us. When there was a jerk that almost upset us. And I knew that something dirty had happened.

"'What was that?' I asked.

"'Jim was fixing to kill me,' Barny answered. 'But I was too quick for him.' As cool as that, and he adds: 'I'm putting him overboard.'

"I knew that your father had about ten thousand dollars' worth of pearls in his pockets," Kong Binny went on, "for he'd just made a clean-up of the Two Bottle lagoon that had never been touched before. And pretty soon, Barny says, 'Well, he hasn't got any pearls on him,' he says."

CULLEN listened in silence. There was a thread of ice in his blood, but his brain was functioning all right. There had been reference to the Two Bottle lagoon in the last letter his father had ever written. There must have been not ten but more nearly a hundred thousand dollars' worth of pearls in his father's possession at the time of the murder.

"Then what?" Cullen asked.

"Barny put your father overboard," said Kong Binny.

"He lied about the pearls?"

"I know he did, and Barny knew I knew he did. Before daylight he tried to cut my throat, too."

"As you tried to get mine cut tonight," said Jimmy Cullen.

"Put yourself in my place. What I'm telling you happened almost twenty years ago. For twenty years I've been on the beach. Not a day or a night in all that time have I been out of danger."

"What kept you here?"

"Barny d'Orlaine has all the pearls in the world."

"And for these—even on the off-chance—you'd have taken my head."

"It was your head or mine."

"Why mine?"

"It would have been my ticket of admission to Barny's presence."

"What then?"

I'D have killed him. But before that my Kanak, Chowee, would have killed Noni. It's all set. If you and I went in together we could manage it easier yet—split even."

"How about Bully Finch?"

"At a word from me," Kong Binny whispered, "those Kanaka boys of mine in the other canoe would drown the old buzzard and no one ever be the wiser."

Cullen controlled himself. There was something, after all, about this indifferent and dispassionate discussion of murder that reminded him of the sea in some of its moods. You didn't fly into a rage—nor get nervous, either—when the sea made light of the lives of men.

After leaving the atoll of Maru-Maru behind them, the two canoes had headed to the south and west, where Kong Binny said he had a village of his own—where he was, he claimed, something of a king himself, although in constant dread of the lord of Nekaloa.

"How far are we from Nekaloa now?" Cullen asked.

"Twenty-four miles, just about, with an island or two to dodge."

"Occupied?"

"Empty."

CULLEN laid a triangulation in his mind. He didn't have to ask the course. And even the distance that Kong Binny had just mentioned confirmed certain of his calculations. In his mind he could see Maru-Maru on the chart, then Nekaloa, almost due west—one point north; it had been the intervening island that had bothered him. He sighted the Southern Cross.

"Kong Binny," Cullen said softly, "tell your men to ease off and lay their canoes alongside."

"What's the idea?"

"Do what I tell you. I'm captain here."

"Aye, aye, sir," said Kong Binny, with his eyes on his own gun in Cullen's hand; and he gave the order.

The paddlers eased their stroke and the two canoes rocked lightly toward each other like a brace of friendly ducks.

"I'm going to unship you," said Cullen to the Kong. "I'm going on alone."

"To Nekaloa?"

"Get into the other canoe. You and Bully Finch can settle your differences and steer your own course. I'll steer mine."

All this time old Bully Finch had been sitting in the stern of the other canoe as if he were asleep or deaf. But suddenly he raised his head and said something that Cullen didn't catch. It might have been some island word of command, or, for the matter of that, some password from the old days when Bully and the Kong were sailing together.

From somewhere forward on one or the other of the canoes a paddle was thrown, and as Cullen dodged, he saw one of the canoemen in Bully Finch's boat rising to strike.

He fired just as the blow came down; and after that, everything seemed to have happened at once, crowded into the same half-second. There'd been an explosion of cries; he'd seen Kong Binny, wounded though he was, lunging to make the other canoe; and the reason for the Kong's move was instantly revealed as the canoe in which he and Cullen had been seated face to face flopped over like a seal.

After that the sea was full of floating arms and legs, and all of these—Cullen knew—were the arms and legs of enemies to whom the sea was as their native element.

There was nothing to do but swim for it.

There for many seconds it seemed as if every swimmer with whom he came in contact pawed blindly in the water to touch his head. By his head they would know him.

There was no moon. But the sea was filled with the shine of phosphorous and star reflections. As Cullen came to the surface he hesitated. His decision wasn't long delayed.

The sea, in its cruelest mood, could not be more cruel than these two pirates and their crews.

He dove again and swam away.

CHAPTER XI

The White Schooner

IT WAS going to be a night of haunts—he knew that—if he allowed it to be. Some grisly stories he had both heard and read concerning the sharks in these waters. So far as that sort of danger was concerned, the barracuda—with its jagged teeth and its readiness to attack any moving object that comes its way—might be just as bad.

But a man might walk through

Africa and never meet lion or leopard or even a poisonous snake. More pearl divers died of disease than they did from attacks of these man-eaters of the deep.

He shut out shark and barracuda from his thought. He had a long swim ahead of him at the best. It wasn't one to take at racing speed. While he swam—he told himself—he'd be irrigating that wound of his with the finest lotion in the world. But the thought brought a quick reaction. What if the wound should be bleeding again? Blood was the universal bait for sharks. Where blood was the sharks swarmed in like their brethren of the air, the buzzards.

For a time he was swimming strongly with a breast stroke. There was an easy swell. The water was smooth.

There was no sense in being afraid of sharks. If sharks came—but they wouldn't come. Let them come!

He was on his back and conning the stars. He found the Southern Cross again and got his direction from it. Kong Binny had said that there were a couple of islands between here and Nekaloa. He'd probably been telling the truth when he said it, for there'd been no reason for him to lie.

THERE was a blue planet whose name he didn't know, but he knew just about the time of its lift. He found it a quarter up. The time must be getting on toward midnight—say, five more hours of darkness. A westerly current set through the islands here. With that to help him he ought to make a dozen miles or so by sunrise. And he didn't want to forget that, either—he'd want some strength left to get him through the surf.

He kicked himself along easily for a while on his back. He was just rolling over for a crawl when he saw a swift streak of light off to the right of him.

A shark! He knew it was. The knowledge was sharp and well-defined. But he decided, just the same, to leave it indefinite. He went into a leisurely but space-eating crawl. He was watching the stars, but he was also watching the surface of the sea. He felt no pain from his wound.

WAS he leaving some blood trail in his wake, after all? Again he'd seen the unmistakable swift curve of surface fire left by a dorsal fin. Then, as he turned to follow it, he'd seen another.

He splashed the water with a foot and then a hand. But the effort told on him. You could—he told himself—waste a lot of energy like that; and wasted energy would mean death by drowning, most likely, even if he escaped the sharks. There wasn't much choice.

He rolled to his back again and kept his attention fixedly on the blue planet, trusting to the westerly current to give him needed mileage.

No sooner had he settled himself in this fatalistic mood than he heard a tremendous snort, and it was all he could do to hold back a shout of joy. Those fins he had seen were the fins, not of sharks, but of porpoises, and sharks feared porpoises as men feared sharks.

He swam softly now.

How far he swam, or how long, he didn't even try to estimate. He pushed along with only an occasional glance at the stars, following the play of the porpoises more than estimates of time and mileage—swimming almost completely submerged, imitating the friendly porpoises to some extent, a long breath, then under.

The blue planet was almost

straight overhead. The porpoises were gone. But there would be no more danger of sharks, something told him. He was over on his back once more and resting when he was thrilled by the certainty that he had just heard voices.

He twisted around and raised his head. A white shape reared its mass straight ahead of him—looking for the moment like a white cottage on a low shore. It took him another moment to realize that this was not a cottage but a ship, and then the reason for his failure to recognize it immediately came to him, and the very knowledge brought him some little preliminary thrill of suspicion.

The ship showed no light except through a port-hole aft, then through an open companion somewhere aft. Swimming high, now, Cullen could make out that she was anchored from the way she rode. What sort of a skipper could she have, he wondered, that she should have no riding lights, even in waters like these?

Again the sound of voices reached him. First there was the muffled voice of a man, low-pitched and vehement, but at this distance not to be understood. Then a woman's voice—a girl's voice—and this came clear enough:

"I will not! I will not! I will not!"

THERE was something about the voice and that thrice-repeated declaration that made Cullen forget his fatigue, forget everything except some recollection of his own experience since coming into these waters.

He swam toward the vessel, keeping low and making no sound, although there would be little enough likelihood of his being discovered from the look and sound of things.

She was, he made out, a small white schooner, with sharp and graceful lines; built originally exclusively for sail but now with a smell of auxiliary power about her.

He rested with his hand on her anchor chain and read her name:

"Patuki!"

An island vessel. She might be anything—Chinese, French, Australian.

The woman's voice was still ringing in his brain, although that declaration of hers had been followed by silence, and he began to paw his way back along her side to the open port.

He was half-way when he heard voices again. Two men were talking on the deck just above him.

"She says she won't," one said, and laughed.

The other growled an oath. "I'll show her whether she won't or not," he said.

"What if she stays pig-headed?"

"Well," the second replied, "we've gone this far and we'll go the rest of the way, that's all."

The speakers moved away.

After an interval, Cullen brought himself to the open port. The brass rim of it was within reach of his hand, he judged, with a little straining.

Just as he was about to make the effort he was aware that someone had come to the port and was looking out. A faint gust of perfume reached him. He heard a sigh.

"Listen," he called softly. "Quiet now. Tell me—are you in need of help?"

CHAPTER XII

Morgane Lille

THE question had been followed by a silence so long that Cullen was beginning to despair. But when the answer did come it made up in a measure for any loss of time. There was a tumultuous but softly spoken affirma-

tive. Then, instead of the time-killing and unanswerable questions he feared, there came more information:

"I'm armed. If this is a trick—"

Cullen swung up and caught the copper sill of the port-hole. The opening wasn't much more than a foot in diameter. He took a two-handed grip and pulled himself up from the water with his feet against the hull, but before he showed his face he spoke again.

"Don't be frightened," he said. "I'm a stranger. I've been swimming all night. I'm a sort of cast-away—"

His face was at the open port. He was looking into a little cabin. Again a faint breath of the perfume he had noticed before reached him—delicate, foreign, fine—and then he was seeing a girl who also seemed to be all these things, plus the added appeal that tragedy gives most women.

The girl in the cabin was simply dressed but there was an air of class about her. The air of tragedy was unmistakable—in her shadowed blue eyes, her pallor, and even a certain gauntness about her young face, but her courage seemed to be unshaken.

She stood there bravely looking at Cullen, while Cullen looked at her.

"I know I look tough," he said, trying to reassure her. "I was sailing my boat alone—around the world—when I was shipwrecked."

"You are—"

"American."

SUDDENLY she seemed to feel a gust of confidence. She came a little closer.

"The people of this boat are keeping me a prisoner," she whispered hurriedly. "I don't know why. See, I have a pistol." And she displayed an automatic that she'd been holding in her hand. "I won't let them in—and they won't let me out." There was the beginning of a forced smile on her lips, but the look in her eyes belied it. "They want me to marry the mate."

"Why?"

"Because they think I'm an heiress. And I'm poor—poor. That's why I'm here."

"I'll get you out," said Cullen.

"How?"

"Fight."

"Alone? They're too many."

"I'll manage."

"Are you armed?" She must have read the look in his eyes. "Take this," she said, impulsively, and thrust the automatic toward him. She must have realized that if he took it she would be leaving herself defenseless.

But Cullen sharply shook his head. He heard a step approaching along the deck. He let himself slip back into the water, taking with him a memory of tumbled fair hair and appealing blue eyes.

Hugging the hull, he came round under the little vessel's counter and there, as he'd hoped, found a dinghy bobbing at a painter made fast to the schooner's taffrail. He was over the rail and onto the poop almost before he'd had time to reflect on the danger of finding anyone there.

As it was, he almost stepped on a sailor. The man lay on his back with his head on a coil of rope and was sound asleep. Cullen let him lie. His chief hope lay below. If he could surprise and overcome either the mate or the captain the battle would, he believed, be as good as won.

IT must, he imagined, now be well along toward the end of the middle watch—say, between three and four. It was proof of the excitement that must have been running on board this ship that the girl and the captain and the mate should

all have been awake and about at this ungodly hour.

He'd followed the port-rail forward, keeping an eye out for the man he'd heard tramping the deck while he and the girl were still talking, when he heard someone address him from almost within reach of his arm.

"Who in the hell—"

It was the voice of one of the men he had heard speaking on deck—he who had said that he'd show the girl whether she would or not. And it may have been this knowledge that sprung what fire and energy Cullen had left just then, amplified it. Anyway, instant action was all that could have saved him.

For, even before that profane question of the officer was more than half out he was shoving a hand into the side pocket of his coat in search of a gun. The officer should have been quicker on the draw, or have used the hand as a guard.

On the instant, Cullen had flailed at him, catching him with a lucky swing. The question broke off into a muffled roar. Then the two of them went down to the deck, Cullen riding the man beneath him as he might have ridden an unbroken horse.

WET and practically naked, Cullen could fight with legs and arms, fists and feet.

Yet the fight seemed by way of lasting forever. It went increasingly brutal—the officer trying to bite and gouge, to get his gun, to use his knees and boots. It was evident from the first move that there was little about deck and water-front fighting that he hadn't learned, or that he didn't have the strength and the will to demonstrate. At the same time he was becoming increasingly loud.

There were curses, commands, howls and fighting epithets. They were ended by a thud, and Cullen came up panting with a gun in his hand just as two dark figures rushed toward him—one from forward, one from aft, where that sleeper must have been roused.

Cullen swung the gun.

"Stow the lip," he said. "Pick up this stiff and take him down to the cabin. Lively."

They were half-way to the companion when another officer came on the run.

"What happened?" he cried.

"This!" said Cullen, and shoved the gun in his face.

Until then, it appeared, he hadn't seen Cullen at all, he had been so intent on the form the two seamen carried.

"Who—" he began; and he also seemed to be on the point of reaching for a weapon.

"Stick 'em up," said Cullen. "I'll explain later."

Cullen routed out another gun. The whole affair had taken less than two minutes.

But it was all of ten minutes later before he knocked at the door of the cabin where the girl was confined. He'd needed the delay to find some clothes and get into them.

"My name," she was telling him a little later, "is Morgane Lille. I'm the niece of someone perhaps you've heard about—"

CHAPTER XIII

The Lagoon

SHE HAD paused before completing what she'd been about to say. There was a flash of recollection in her expressive eyes.

"Why, you," she exclaimed, then hesitated again.

Cullen was looking at her, but his attention was elsewhere. He was standing near the open door with an

eye and an ear for anything that might transpire. The possibilities of something happening were ample. Moreover, he was beginning to sag beneath the strain—physically, mentally. He heard the girl say:

"You must be Mr. James Cullen. You told me that you had started out to sail alone around the world."

"That was wrong," he told her, still without great attention. "I was really headed for Nekaloa."

"Nekaloa! So was I."

NOW his full attention came to her. He saw that her breathing had quickened. That her eyes were glistening.

"You?" he exclaimed. "What were you going to do in Nekaloa?"

"I had no other place to go—no family, no money, no prospects. I heard that I had a rich old uncle living alone here in the South Seas—"

"Your uncle—Bernard d'Orlaine?"

She nodded. After a stunned second or two she said: "I suppose that it's symbolic that we should stand here facing each other and—each of us armed."

"Why do you say that?"

"I heard—for the first time—the story of your father and my uncle while I was in Papeete on the way out here. I heard it by accident, when someone was telling about your starting out from California on a mysterious errand—was it—an errand of revenge?"

"Listen," Cullen said. "Could you really use that gun of yours if you had to?"

"On you?"

"No. But I've just committed piracy. I've got the captain, the mate and two men locked up. I'm going to inspect the ship, get something to eat, then stand watch for a couple of hours while you get some sleep, after which—"

"You need sleep more than I do," she said quickly.

"All right," he said. "Then I'll get some sleep while you stand watch. After which, I'll bring this ship into Nekaloa."

The Kanaka cook on the *Patuki* was an old Nekaloa islander. And it may have been while he was serving the new master of the schooner coffee and sandwiches on the after deck that he heard a name that had become a tradition in the islands hereabouts.

"Cullen! A son of Captain Jim Cullen of the *Alahoi!*"

There must have been a good deal about young Jimmy Cullen to recall that earlier James Cullen. It was something that Bully Finch had been quick enough to notice.

Like practically all the people hereabouts, the cook was as much at home in the water as a mullet. It was still dark when he went over the side—and the night with an hour to go.

But the cook had been loyal enough to the other members of the crew to pass the word around.

This man who'd taken charge was no ordinary sea thief hopped up with oko or something worse. His name was Cullen, and he was back to pay a visit on the White King of Nekaloa, Bernard d'Orlaine.

IT couldn't have been much after the first break of day over his island world before d'Orlaine himself got news of what was going on.

Just as the sun began to flood the ocean with an overflow of gold, d'Orlaine awoke to hear a faint pulse of distant drums in the air. The island wireless was at work again. He lay there lazily listening.

The schooner *Patuki* had passed the island yesterday, instead of making the lagoon by the western inlet. But ships without much power were

apt to do that when the cross-current was running too strong.

It was one of the charms of Nekaloa that not one ship in a dozen could risk the entrance to that vast and perfect harbor furnished by Nekaloa's deep lagoon.

There was an eastern sea gate to the lagoon as well as the one to the west, but the western one was the better of the two. Unless the skipper of the *Patuki* was a fool, he'd circle the island again and try for the western inlet, or dump the girl off on the barrier reef without trying to enter the lagoon at all.

But suddenly some note or other in that pulse of drum music caused him to start up. He was in the room where he kept his pearls. The parrot also was there, apparently dozing on his hoop. But the parrot also had heard.

"War! War!" the parrot muttered, and its voice was that of a husky old salt sailorman. "War! War! War!"

"By God," said d'Orlaine, "I believe he's right!"

He was off his cot. From under the pillow he brought out an automatic pistol, then that wadded old tobacco pouch with its selected pearls.

Over his pajamas he put on a linen coat—but this must have been on account of its pockets, not for warmth, as the day was breaking hot and fine. Into the breast pocket of the coat he put the pearls. Into a side pocket he placed a gun.

He stepped over to a gong and touched it with a knuckle.

Where in the hell was Noni?

AS he stepped out onto the veranda he saw someone whom he thought was Noni coming in his direction with a breakfast tray, but there was something about the figure that aroused a vague suspicion. Instantly his eyes came to the right foot of the servant. Both feet were bare.

What was this? Noni—the real Noni—had lost a toe to a shark. These two feet were perfect. He stood there motionless, unmoving, as one who is lost in thought—while he heard the parrot still mumbling of war in its husky voice and while the warm air vibrated with a development of this message.

Just as the double of Noni was about to pass, d'Orlaine raised his eyes and met the eyes of the man with the tray.

THERE was a shot from d'Orlaine's gun and the tray crashed. The man pitched across it and lay there on the veranda floor.

Not a word had been spoken. What would have been the good of questioning him, anyway? The fellow would simply have wasted time with lies.

The lagoon on this side lay smooth and unbroken to the distant barrier.

The surface of it was like the surface of a gigantic pearl.

D'Orlaine rounded the house and looked toward the western entrance through the barrier reef.

He saw that a schooner had just entered it and was pushing across the smooth water toward the island. But around it were a hundred tiny specks which d'Orlaine knew to be canoes.

"War!"

Some secrets of a revolt in his island empire had been reaching him for months, and he'd sought to forestall the trouble in a number of ways — murder, inter-island feuds, promoted raids on the less important islands.

He stood there brooding, one hand on his pistol, another on that packet of pearls.

CHAPTER XIV

Into Whose Hands?

JIMMY CULLEN had slept two hours. He awoke at the hour of what the natives call the sky-shine, when the rising sun, still below the sea horizon, has lit up the cumulus clouds of the trade and sent a reflected light down over the island world. He awoke of his own volition, in response to that inner alarm clock that most men have, and found Morgane Lille standing near him.

They were on the after deck, beside the wheel. She'd laid her automatic on the binnacle head. She was quiet but alert.

"Now you sleep," he told her, springing to his feet.

She smiled slightly and shook her head.

"Listen," she said. "Do you hear anything? It sounds like the beat of a motor somewhere. Perhaps my uncle has a motor boat out looking for me."

Cullen listened. He recognized the sound. "Those are drums," he said.

She told him that she'd been hearing the sounds ever since he'd gone to sleep.

He didn't tell her what his suspicions were. He called a seaman who was standing in the waist. It was one of the men—an islander with a touch of white in him—who'd helped carry the captain to a cabin after the fight.

"Call your mates," Cullen told him. "All hands. I'll have a word with them."

"Aye, sir."

There'd been a crew of five besides the captain and the mate. The cook was missing. Carl, another mixed breed, who ranked as second mate and engineer, folded his arms and lounged against the rail.

"Stand up there, you," said Cullen.

Carl spat over the rail and held his pose. Cullen was across the space that lay between them before Carl could pull himself together, and poked him an unexpected blow in the stomach with his left. Cullen turned his back and walked over to where Morgane Lille was standing. When he faced about the line was straight.

His speech was brief.

"I've taken charge of this ship," he said. "I'm taking her into Nekaloa. I've arrested your captain and first mate. For this I assume full responsibility. Do what I tell you and I'll stand by you. My name is Cullen. Are you with me?"

"Aye, sir!"—it was unanimous.

MR. CARL remains engineer and second mate"—there was the beginning of a grin, but it quickly faded. "Mr. Carl, start your motor. I'll get the anchor in."

There was the low rim of an atoll due west. This, Cullen guessed, would be the first of the two islands that lay between him and Nekaloa. An island boy, half-grown, confirmed the guess. He was a natural pilot and pilot largely was what he was going to be for the twelve-mile passage that lay ahead.

The power slackened the anchor chain and the hook came in handily. The *Patuki* was just under weigh when a square-sailed catamaran showed around the curve of the shore half a mile ahead. There was hardly a breath of air, yet the catamaran was making the most of it. She was followed a little later by a flotilla of canoes.

From the first, there'd been a tenseness among the crew—islanders all of them. They also had been listening to the drum talk of the past two hours.

Morgane Lille was scanning the flotilla with a rapt look.

Cullen gave her a glance. Did she guess what might happen in the next five minutes or so? She might have been a girl just out of high school or a convent. But she'd showed the nerve of a man. There was no use in keeping her in the dark if she hadn't already guessed the truth.

"I believe," said Cullen—and at once her brilliant eyes met his—"that we're in for trouble."

"They're going to attack us?"

"They may."

He reached for the makeshift speaking tube connected with the engine room.

"Give us all you've got, Mr. Carl." He spoke again to the girl. "Nerves all right?"

"Yes."

"Go down to the cabin where we put that captain and mate. Keep your gun ready, but don't fire unless you have to. Open the door and tell them to come up here. Tell them we're about to be boarded. That ought to bring them. Watch yourself."

SHE was gone. She'd been up all night. Of that she hadn't mentioned a word. Her back was straight and her step was quick and light as she walked swiftly across the deck. She was holding her automatic in her two hands somewhat as if it were a captive bird, but he knew she'd be capable of using it if the need arose.

Was he always to be thrown in the way of enemies—and enemies upon whom he would have to depend? Last night it had been Bully Finch and Kong Binny. Now it was the captain and the mate of this vessel whom last night he'd manhandled and locked up.

Yet he couldn't leave them unarmed and locked up without a chance to defend themselves—could he?—in case of a raid.

And it looked like a boarding party.

The catamaran was dead ahead. The canoes were fanning out.

"What's your name?" he asked the half-grown pilot at his side.

"Sammy."

"You savvy steer by wheel?"

"Yassir, master."

"All right. Take the wheel. Now. Star'bord! Hard down!"

The boy threw the wheel over like a veteran and the *Patuki*, quick to respond like most of these old islanders, swung off to the right.

"Smart, Sammy. Now ease her back."

CULLEN decided he'd seen enough. As soon as the schooner had swung a little off her course, there was a scene of renewed activity aboard the catamaran and the canoes. Not more than a quarter of a mile of open water now lay between the *Patuki*.

"And hold her as she is," Cullen told his helmsman.

"Yassir, master!"

From the companionway in the waist, Cullen saw the captain appear, then the mate. He looked for a third figure—it appeared—Morgane Lille's, and she was no longer holding her automatic like a captive bird, but as a regular fighting man might have done.

"You are Mr. Jones," Cullen said to the captain, who was looking morose.

"I'm Mr. Jones."

"And you are Mr. Belknap?"

"Yes, sir," said the mate.

"If I give you two gentlemen guns with which to defend yourselves and the ship in case of attack, will you promise not to use them against this young lady or myself?"

Mr. Jones was about to protest,

but his roving eyes caught sight of the island war fleet.

"Good God, yes!" he exclaimed.

"Good God, yes—sir!" Belknap echoed his chief.

CHAPTER XV

Stag and Hounds

THEY were in a sea trap—Captain Jones confessed to that; and there was a sense of guilt upon him for having put his vessel there. Deep-water channels ran everywhere. They revealed themselves by broad lanes of dark purple in the morning sea. But many of these lanes led nowhere—stopped like a blind alley by a submerged reef.

There was only one channel, not more than two hundred yards wide at its greatest width and in places coming down to a scant fifty, where a vessel of even this schooner's moderate draught could ride.

The captain had his gun.

Cullen spoke to him softly: "It's your ship, too, sir; but you'll get us out of here and into Nekaloa lagoon. Understood?"

"It is," said Captain Jones. But there was still a trace of sullenness in his manner. "And may I ask who you might be?"

"Sir!"

"Sir to you, sir!" said the captain, with his eyes ahead.

"My name is Cullen—and you'd better make it 'captain'—Captain James Cullen, the yawl *Buddy*, San Pedro!"

The captain started. The whole interchange was over in a brace of seconds.

Cullen was in the bows as the *Patuki* bore down on the waiting war fleet. He was barely there before a flight of arrows and spears came over. Most of the arrows flew high and most of the spears fell short—the islanders were Chinese when it came to wasting ammunition; but it was enough for a declaration of war.

Cullen steadied himself on the rail and at his first shot dropped the man at the sharp prow of the catamaran.

Before he could deliberate over his second shot there was the bark of a gun at his side and a quick glance showed him Morgane Lille standing there. His eyes came back to the business ahead, but they as if dragged a picture of the girl with them—a picture that wouldn't fade—not for years, or ever, perhaps. Her loose short hair was a flowing mane in the breeze. Her eyes were brilliant. She had a spot of heightened color in each cheek.

"Keep under cover," Cullen recommended. "You'll be their target."

"Wrong," she said. "They want to get me alive. But they never will."

And she fired again.

"Two hits," Cullen commended.

And he switched his intended shot from the catamaran to a bowman in one of the canoes. He saw the fellow slump back. In an instant his canoe mates had pushed him overboard. There he swam slowly in circles.

CATAMARAN and schooner were now set for a crash—the old *Patuki* putting all the kick she had into her single screw and the island sailer crossing the water under the impulse of the light breeze with something of the giddy speed of a water spider.

"Then, stand by," said Cullen, as he fired twice again. "The two of us together are better than one."

He heard her voice: "That's right!"

"Squat down. Reload. I'll fire."

It seemed as if she'd anticipated

his thought. Without turning his head he passed back his pistol. It was her own that came to his hand, still—he had the feeling in his hand —with something of her electricity in it.

There was a thud and a grating impact, not very loud, and over this a cloud of savage cries.

All at once and all of them together, five naked savages, painted and decorated as for a feast, were on the rail where the wrecked catamaran was sliding past. Three others were clinging to the forerigging.

Cullen ran a few steps firing as he went. One islander fell inboard, bringing a war club with him—almost like a hockey stick, but heavy as iron and studded with shark's teeth.

And these were the guys who "wanted to take her alive!"

The words were in his brain, and so was that scene on the beach where he'd had his first encounter with cannibals.

The gun in his hand was hot and he laid it on the deck beside the girl. Then, instead of taking the freshly reloaded weapon right away, he picked up the war club and struck the fellow who first came in from the bowsprit. The fellow sagged back, dropping an ax.

Cullen dropped the club and took the ax. He was in the forerigging himself, and chopping like a fireman, when a voice reached him through the din.

HE turned, and there was Morgane Lille with her back half-turned facing the rush of a painted black giant. She fired. The black giant sprawled.

There were other boarders elsewhere, Cullen knew. Without looking he knew this, it seemed, and also that both Captain Jones and the mate, Mr. Belknap, were doing their share.

Rogues often make good fighting men, Cullen decided.

And just as he did so, he was almost sure—yet with a sense of hallucination—that he heard a man's voice somewhere bellowing his name.

BUT he had his revolver again and was firing. Was all war, he wondered, like this chaos of instinct and hallucination? It was as if some part of himself—his brain, perhaps—had shrunk far, far back into some protective cave. And then, suddenly, this shrinking, thinking part of himself was rushing out again and telling him that the fight was over.

The fight—so Captain Jones told him—thus far had lasted just ten minutes and that they could consider themselves lucky if it didn't begin all over again when they started to find their way through the Nekaloa barrier to the lagoon.

It was the fight at the entrance to the lagoon that Bernard d'Orlaine watched—first from the veranda of the house that had been his castle, then from the shore of his island paradise over which a curse had come.

There was a fair breeze now rippling the breast of the lagoon, and the surface was no longer like that of a pearl. It was more like a black opal—the idea occurred to d'Orlaine—as he stood there and looked out across it at this marine battle that no history would ever record. Nor would any history ever record the downfall of the White King of Nekaloa.

For this was the downfall. He made no doubt about that. The drums had been telling him since a long time that his kingdom was going the way of Babylon and Tyre.

And one reason why it was going—he admitted it—was because a certain man he'd murdered had now come back to exact retribution in the form of a son. The natives had heard this. The whole world of the islands had heard it. Captain Jim Cullen had returned to Nekaloa in the form of a son.

Suddenly d'Orlaine felt a sort of horror of the place. Still in his pajamas and loose linen coat, his head bare and nothing but grass sandals on his feet, he hurried along a path to a grass-thatched boat house where he had a light catamaran of his own.

CHAPTER XVI

Truce

THAT had been no mere brush with natives at the mouth of the lagoon. There were natives, many of them, but they'd been led by two of the keenest white pirates (or nearly white) who'd ever contributed their own curse to this cursed part of the world: Bully Finch and Kong Binny, no less.

With the disappearance of Jimmy Cullen the night before, Bully and the Kong had patched up a truce for mutual profit and had decided to raid Nekaloa, at once and on their own, without further delay. Both had become aware that the fall of the White King must be near. Why not hasten that fall a day or so and get their hands on the loot?

Any day, now, a French gunboat might be showing up, and then it would be too late.

They'd headed their outfit all night straight for the entrance to Nekaloa Harbor.

They were just in time to see the *Patuki* heading for the pass into the lagoon.

Neither Captain Jones nor Mr. Belknap, the mate, were up to fighting such characters as Bully Finch and Kong Binny. Jimmy Cullen himself had been taken by surprise. He was hampered now by the necessity of playing for the safety of the girl.

He and the girl were practically prisoners as the *Patuki* at last came footing her way carefully into the Nekaloa lagoon.

Of all this, Bernard d'Orlaine had some premonition as he headed out toward the schooner in his light catamaran. While still at a distance he saw the unmistakable forms and faces of Bully Finch and the Kong at the schooner's rail. Yet he felt no fear of them as he signaled them and they replied.

The schooner slowed and the catamaran came alongside. Someone cast him a line and in another moment he was coming over the side.

It was, he knew, the beginning of the end.

Bully Finch and Kong Binny were there on deck to greet him—Bully Finch with a taunting smile, Kong Binny with his usual face of slightly yellow porcelain.

THERE was no handshaking, but the three saluted each other by their intimate names.

"Who's the captain?" d'Orlaine asked.

"Kong," Bully Finch conceded without hesitation. "We were just comin' fer to call on you. You know why."

"I know why."

"We got yer niece on board," said Bully Finch. "She's a fine-lookin' gal."

Bernard d'Orlaine surveyed him coldly. "Suppose you stow your jib," he said. "I'd hate to spoil your cruise."

"He's right," said Kong Binny, with his small hard eyes on Bully Finch.

"In the old days nobody ever talked to me like that," said Bully.

"Any other passengers?" d'Orlaine asked, ignoring Finch and addressing the Kong.

Kong spoke slowly. "Someone you might not care to see—a Mr. Cullen."

"On the contrary," said the White King. "Where is he—and where is she?"

"They're there together abaft the deck house. They both got wounded. They're taking care of each other."

"I want pearls," said Bully Finch, thrusting forward to recover the "face" he had lost. He panted: "Pearls—er that gal!"

Strangely, d'Orlaine heard him this time with a smile.

"It'll have to be the pearls, then, Bully," he said. "But it's a pity you won't be able to use them in hell."

He turned his back on the Kong and Bully and went aft.

Jimmy Cullen came to his feet at the sight of the tall stranger who had suddenly appeared around a corner of the deck house. A flash of recognition had passed between them—the sort of recognition such as might have passed, say, between a cobra and a mongoose when neither of these creatures had ever seen the other before. It was like a recognition inherited, fated, inevitable, beyond the possibility of confusion.

"You," said Cullen, "are Bernard d'Orlaine."

THERE was an assent in the older man's eyes, at the same time a haze of pain and also of madness.

His voice was a whisper. "And you are Captain Cullen's boy!"

"I know now," said Cullen, "that I came to kill you."

Bernard d'Orlaine shrank a little, but not from fear. It was as if he'd been fighting some invisible enemy all these years and that now, at last, it was the invisible enemy—not this living one—who'd overwhelmed him. He was already beaten, and Cullen recognized this. This was no longer the White King of Nekaloa, the killer, the master of one of the world's great fortunes, and that fortune won by treachery and blood. This was merely a crazed old man, tottering to some other end that was now at hand.

"Yes, you might kill me," said d'Orlaine, in a sort of breathless whisper. "But it would be no longer worth the effort."

HIS eyes wavered away from Cullen. He was a picture of such helpless misery just then that Cullen felt all his old purpose of vengeance, even of retribution, seeping away. Meantime, Morgane Lille was on her feet, and it was at her that d'Orlaine now looked.

"I am your niece," she said, although the identification wasn't necessary. "I'm sorry. I'll not be staying here."

"Morgane," her uncle exclaimed, as if coming out of a reverie. "No, this is no place for you. I'll be going—away—also. But I'm providing for your future."

Without waiting for her answer, he turned again to Cullen.

"I don't ask you to trust me," he said, "but I trust you. Take this. Go back—go back, for God's sake!—to where the white people live—"

He seemed to be touched by a sort of mounting hysteria, a loss of self-control, as he pulled out what looked like a heavily charged tobacco pouch from his pocket and passed it over to Cullen.

Cullen took it, with some faint realization of what the sack might contain.

"You keep half—give her half—not of the pearls themselves! Get

rid of them! Forget them!—but of what they'll bring."

He started to turn away, almost as if he were in a panic, as if he wanted to run, holding up a hand slightly as though he would shield his sight from that treasure bag he'd just turned over to—not the younger but the older Cullen—the man he'd killed. But he checked himself.

"I myself," he repeated, "am going away. I shan't return. You—and she—and the others who'll be left there with you—will find enough to make you comfortable here for a few days. It won't be long before a French gunboat will be poking its nose in here. Until then, you'll have nothing to fear."

Before they could have stopped him, even had they wanted to, he had turned and was gone again.

Cullen and the girl were more solemn than ever after this strange interview.

"Yours and mine," said Cullen, balancing the sack in his hand. "You'd better keep it in case—I get sunk."

"No, you keep it," she said. "I trust you even more than I trust myself."

They looked at each other, still solemnly, yet with some fresh blossoming of understanding.

CHAPTER XVII

Outward Bound

IT WAS all arranged. It was an arrangement arrived at largely through the insistence of that White King of Nekaloa who said that he wanted to go to sea again. And what better company could he find—now that he was getting old—than those companions of his younger days and occasional rivals, Kong Binny and Bully Finch?

Kong Binny was captain. He could select his crew from those of his followers with the greatest taste for piracy. For none of the leaders expected this cruise of theirs to be very long. All they wanted was a short and happy cruise to a safe hideaway—now that they had a ship of their own—and the greatest store of pearls that ever left the South Seas.

That the pearls were actually there, Bernard d'Orlaine proved to his fellow captains by showing them a part of what he had. He opened the filing case himself and showed them that clotted treasure of the sort for which men murdered their friends and women went mad.

Then, with infinite caution, the filing case was carried down from the great house that would no longer be a royal castle—down through the garden that was like a bit of Eden—to the shore of that lagoon which so often stretched away to its jade-green rim like a nacre lake.

The little old *Patuki* was lying there, well in. Captain Jones and his officers and men had been put ashore. They would enjoy the hospitality of the chatelaine of Nekaloa, Morgane Lille, until the regular semi-annual visit of the French gunboat, which ought to come about in a fortnight or so.

The refugees were on the veranda of the big house as the little old *Patuki* got up sails and anchor and started across the lagoon for the open gate to the sea. It was a gate that she was destined never to pass again.

THE little schooner was about half way across the lagoon with her three pirates and her pirate crew, and freighted with treasure as probably no other pirate ship in the world had ever been, when those who watched her saw a crater of smoke and flame open amidships. It

was a crater that seemed to spread rather than diminish. Before the detonation reached the watchers on the veranda a billow of smoke had blotted out the schooner entirely. And all that could be seen of the ship then—or was ever to be seen afterward—were a few flying fragments, mere specks lifted up on the crest of that terrific explosion.

Had Bernard d'Orlaine himself set off that infernal machine that he'd devised for the confusion of his enemies? Or had Kong Binny or—more likely still—old Bully Finch, impatient for another look at the treasure, pulled out a drawer and thus set off that instrument of annihilation?

IT was a mystery that left a tradition behind it, but would remain a mystery still, most likely, for the rest of time.

The French gunboat *Alouette* showed up at Nekaloa's famous lagoon about a fortnight later and there picked up various castaways who wanted to be taken back to Papeete—"Paris of the South Seas"—and what they considered to be civilization.

But Jimmy Cullen and Morgane Lillie were not of the number. In their case a peculiar thing had happened. The servant of the late Bernard d'Orlaine, a native called Noni, showed up one day and spoke of various things. One of the things was that he'd once been in the service of Captain James Cullen and would now like to enter the service of his son. For years, he said, he'd been trying to get up nerve to rob d'Orlaine of sufficient pearls to make up a theft that d'Orlaine had once committed and of which the late Captain Cullen had been the victim. That was why he'd so often stared into his master's treasure room with hankering but a lack of nerve.

Another thing of which Noni spoke was about how he'd been spirited away from this house some time ago and a degenerate twin brother had replaced him—only to get himself properly murdered.

The third thing was this:

Some relative of his on a near-by atoll had found the yawl *Buddy* practically intact, where the hurricane had left her. With a plank or two replaced the *Buddy* would be seaworthy again, and practically new.

THERE was a marrying captain on the French gunboat. So Cullen sent Noni on ahead to "the Paris of the Pacific" to await him there.

As for himself, he wanted to sail the *Buddy* that much further at least.

And since Morgane Lille said that she would like to make the cruise with him, the marrying captain of the *Alouette, de la marine Francaise,* gallantly obliged.

Lances Wild and Zipping Bullets on the Grim Frontiers of India!

RILEY *of the* BENGAL LANCERS

A Gripping, Complete Book-Length Novel

By LIEUT. SCOTT MORGAN

In Next Month's THRILLING ADVENTURES

UNDER WATER



A Stirring Story of Dramatic Adventure Aboard a Submarine in the China Sea

By ACE WILLIAMS

Author of "Gray Skies," "Timber Wolves," etc.

THE climate of Cavite, United States naval base in the Philippine Islands, is one thing. Serving as a very low ranking officer on a giant battleship is another. Being assigned as executive officer and second in command of the H-17, the pride of the underseas fleet in Far East waters, is yet another.

All of these things had something to do with what happened to the submarine H-17 when she went out on one of her regular practice dives in the China Sea with Lieutenant William Kennedy, j. g., as second in command.

All of these things had something to do with what happened, of course. These things and young Jimmy Mizner, who was the ranking C. P. O. aboard, in charge of the submarine's engines. Maybe Mizner had more to do with what happened than anybody or anything. Probably he did, but, then again, what happened might never have happened if it hadn't

been for the climate in Cavite, or the fact that Lieutenant Kennedy was making his first cruise aboard the submarine H-17 after a long tour of duty on the much larger battleships that go to make up the Pacific fleet of the United States Navy.

KENNEDY was not familiar with underwater craft. Jimmy Mizner was.

For all of almost two complete hitches in the navy he had served on the pig boats, as they were affectionately called by the sailors of the fleet; and he knew submarines backward and forward; especially did he understand the engines.

Complicated though they were to the uninitiated who saw nothing but a maze of dials and wheels, cylinders, gauges and gadgets, they were all very simple to Mizner. He looked upon the intricate engines as just being a collection of very simple parts. He understood them and thought nothing of it. Lieutenant Kennedy didn't—but he didn't admit it. In fact, he went out of his way to impress his senior officer that he did.

Bad business, you will say. Well, maybe so. But then Kennedy was young and he was new on pig boats —and then there was that pestiferous climate of Cavite. It does things to people fresh from temperate zones. So does sudden elevation to command.

Kennedy hated Mizner from the first time he had encountered him in the engine room of the H-17. He hated him now when the H-17 stood out to sea for the first practice dives she had taken since the new executive officer had come aboard. The young, red-faced C. P. O. sensed that hate, but it didn't phase him. He had seen young naval officers come aboard the H-17 before, fresh from Mare Island or Bremerton, new to tropic climes. Most of them acted that way—at first.

But most of them got over it, got used to the lesser, slacker discipline of the pig boats. Got used to the easy familiarity between officers and enlisted men that existed in the cramped confines of the small underseas craft.

But Kennedy? Well. . . .

"Time to close the hatch and get down below," Kennedy snapped, his dark eyes flashing.

Jimmy Mizner stood impassive on the foredeck beneath the conning tower, gazing out at the white whipped sea running beyond the sea wall and making accurate mental note of the time it would take the H-17 to get outside the heads.

"Aye, aye, sir." he answered, unruffled, unperturbed. "There's still plenty of time, sir."

"Close the hatch and get below," Kennedy repeated, and his thin lips snarled.

CAPTAIN SINCLAIR, lone-time commander and skipper of the H-17, standing behind Kennedy, shrugged his shoulders and looked at the back of his head contemplatively, then he glanced at Mizner going down the companion.

"There's no hurry," he said to Kennedy, reiterating the sense of Mizner's retort.

The new executive officer went red of face, and he shot an angry look at Jimmy disappearing down the hatch; the fact that Captain Sinclair had agreed with Mizner wasn't easy for him to take.

Ten minutes later the H-17 rounded the stone breakwater and stood out to the open sea. The long cigar-shaped craft rolled heavily as the heavy seas swept against the port side and poured around the conning tower.

Captain Sinclair dodged a volley

of spray that swept over the bridge and turned back to glance at the now distant breakwater. The recent by-play he had witnessed between his new executive officer and Jimmy Mizner had disquieted him somewhat.

"We'll go down now," he announced shortly. "I'll take her down first. Then I'll turn her over to you to bring up for the first dive."

Kennedy nodded, touched his cap.

THE sound of orders being issued back and forth wafted up the hatch. The resonant sputtering of the engine ceased suddenly and the vibration of the hull lessened. The H-17 lost way and began to roll more violently as the sea broke on her beam. Then there was a renewed tremor, the pulsation of the electric motors for underwater propulsion as they were switched on. The submarine began to slip ahead again, slower, though, than before. The diving rudders forward began to move up and down. Captain Sinclair swept the surrounding horizon with his alert eyes, then leaned down the hatch.

"Ride the vents," he ordered.

Down below the flooding valves were opened and the submarine began to settle slowly. The rounded deck sank down and went slowly awash. As the rising water swirled over the deck and swept around the conning tower Captain Sinclair continued to sweep the horizon with his gaze.

But there was nothing in sight, nothing but an endless succession of cotton-crested waves breaking over a field of waving green. Lieutenant Kennedy stood beside him, biting his thin lips and thinking of Mizner, thinking thoughts that he shouldn't have been thinking at all.

"Better go down," Captain Sinclair said.

Kennedy threw his cigarette overside and clambered down the hatch. Spray swept continuously over the conning tower now and the wind howled. Captain Sinclair took one more penetrating look at the rimming horizon, then clambered down after Kennedy, pushing the signal button just before he did so.

The klaxons sounded raucously throughout the boat, then the hatch closed slowly over Captain Sinclair's disappearing head. Then all the noise of klaxons, wind and water was suddenly stilled and a peaceful quiet settled over the H-17 as the hatch was clamped down.

For a few minutes longer the slender craft slid along on the surface, the water curling higher and higher around the conning tower and the deck gun, while foamy spindrift splashed across the deserted bridge.

THE hull sank rapidly, piling up a raised mound over her bow. Finally the dull, gray surface of the hull faded entirely, leaving only the gun and conning tower exposed as small moving inlets around which a mountainous froth boiled and foamed. Then even the gun and conning tower sank beneath the surface and only the long, thin finger of the periscope was left. It pointed ominously at the threatening sky.

In the sinisterly quiet control room below, men twirled wheels and adjusted levers with their eyes focussed on the multiplicity of gauges around them. Turbulent air sighed out through unseen valves and became still. The bow slanted down abruptly as the forward diving rudders took hold, while the pointer on the face of the depth gauge moved slowly around to the figure 60, where it wavered uncertainly for long moments, finally to come definitely to rest.

Two or three men moved about in

the narrow aisle of the engine room under the attentive eye of Jimmy Mizner. Oily, grimy, sweat-besmeared, they went through their duties automatically, efficiently. Jimmy leaned against a support stanchion of the doorway and looked on approvingly. The engine room of the H-17 was his home. Up on deck with the egocentric, Kennedy watching him, he had felt distinctly ill at ease, despite the fact that he allowed none of these feelings to show outwardly. But here it was different. The melodious and vibrant hum of the electric motors was music in his ears. He forgot Kennedy, forgot even Captain Sinclair, and had ears and eyes only for the men and machines under his command.

BUT Kennedy didn't forget Mizner. An hour later he came back through the door to the engine room. Jimmy had thrown off his tunic and shirt, and, stripped to his waist and dripping with sweat, he was bending over the engine supports of the starboard motor working hand in hand with his men to repair some minor difficulty that had developed while the submarine was running submerged.

"Mizner," Kennedy called shrilly, and looked down at his back where the sweat had dried in a grimy splotch.

The young chief petty officer scrambled to his feet obediently, touched his finger tip to his perspiring brow.

"Aye, aye, sir."

Kennedy eyed him sternly, menacingly.

"You have men to do that work for you, haven't you?" he rasped.

Jimmy nodded.

"It's disgracing," Kennedy said. "Chief petty officers should watch their appearance closely. You're a poor example for your men."

Jimmy smiled wanly. His mind still clung to the task he was performing on his beloved engines. He hefted a spanner from one hand to the other. The unconscious movement was noted by Kennedy's darting eyes. And that wan smile of Jimmy's in the face of his admonition flared up in the executive's mind like an open rebuke.

"Attention!" he snapped, his dark eyes flashing fire. "Get to your quarters and police your person. Have the men prepare for inspection of quarters and equipment."

Even as he spoke, the young executive officer realized that he had been hasty. Mizner looked up at him quizzically, his soft blue eyes going wide apart in querulous expression.

"We're standing by for orders from the control room," he answered finally. "We're going to cut in the engines, sir, to go up."

Mizner knew that Kennedy was in the wrong, knew that he would be rebuked sternly by the skipper for such actions if he carried out the orders. Jimmy tried to placate him, smiled again. "There's lots of time for inspection later, sir. We usually do that when running on the surface."

BUT Kennedy's face was red and his passions boiled inside him. He knew that he was in the wrong, but looking beyond Mizner, he noted that the men nudged one another and looked at him deprecatingly. He couldn't stand it. His clenched fist shot up, explosively, as though it had been hurled by some uncontrolled volcano within him. It thudded against Mizner's jaw. Then fully cognizant of what he had done, he turned quickly on his heel and bolted forward.

Jimmy rubbed his jaw and watched him until he disappeared into the control room forward. His own blue

eyes were no longer soft and they were narrowed down to mere slits, while hate thoughts surged through his inflamed brain.

Captain Sinclair was poring over charts when Kennedy came dashing in. Without looking up he said:

"You can take her over now. Take her up and bring her up and bring her down again."

Without looking at Sinclair, Kennedy stepped hastily over to the control board, glanced at it quickly, then called:

"Blow the auxiliary! Tell the engine room crew to stand by for going up orders!"

ANXIOUS to hide his anger from the skipper, eager to counteract the orders he had already given Mizner, his voice took on a tremendous, biting emphasis that caused Captain Sinclair to straighten from his chart table and stare over at the new executive, interrogatively; puzzlement mirrored on his sea bronzed features. Yet, he said nothing. He realized this was the new officer's first attempt to handle the boat.

The bow lifted and the deck slanted aft rather jerkily, too jerkily. Working impulsively, like a man in anger would, he pushed the button that elevated the periscope. It lifted noiselessly. Then he leaned down and grabbed the handles, putting his eyes to the head rest. The indicator on the depth gauge swung swiftly—60—50—40. The pitch of the deck increased.

Captain Sinclair fidgeted. His lips moved and his eyes held on the depth gauge. Finally he spoke.

"You're too light for'ard," he cautioned. "There's no hurry, Kennedy. Better open your valves a bit. There's lots of time."

The young executive winced. He knew he was making a sad showing on his first attempt. The bow of the deep slanted submarine began to catch the effect of the heavy seas running above. It began to roll. The extreme pitch gave it an odd, twisting motion. The hull chattered and wrenched. Still Kennedy did nothing.

THE pointer on the depth gauge still moved around. If he flooded the forward tanks again to stop her upward tilt he might let too much in, then the sub would probably pitch abruptly down. The thought of what might happen in that event was awful. He shuddered and waited, indecisive.

"Shall I flood the for'ard auxiliary again, sir?" came a question from an enlisted man at the valves.

The picture of that same man nudging another, when he had had his trouble with Mizner, flashed to Kennedy's mind.

"No!" Kennedy barked and held his eyes to the periscope and swung it rapidly around with the handles. The boat jerked suddenly and he put out a hand to steady himself. The periscope broke above the surface and he turned it hurriedly in eager scanning of the horizon, unmindful of the fact that the water still clinging to the glass all but blotted his vision. Instead of waiting until the watery film had evaporated in the rush of air, he swung the periscope around once again, then snapped up the handles and pressed the button that started it down again.

"All clear," he shouted.

Captain Sinclair leaped to his side, shoved him away, pressed the button on the periscope again.

"I'll take her over," he piped. Then: "Flood the for'ard tanks! Down—"

The order wasn't finished.

There was a dull thud, then an apparent rebound that threw all the crew to one side of the boat. Some-

thing had struck her forward. Water rushed in, hissing and steaming. Agonized shouts and cries filled the interior of the craft. There was a crunching, scraping sound like strips of sandpaper rubbed together.

"Blow everything! Stand by—" Captain Sinclair called above the din, but his words were lost in the discord of sounds from the rushing waters and scraping hulls.

THE shock of the impact threw Jimmy Mizner against the starboard engine. He leaped back instinctively, tried to get his balance. Men rushed past him and struggled aft. The bow seemed to lurch upwards suddenly, then teeter.

Behind him, as he leaped away from the engines, he heard something that sounded like a groan, but it was instantly drowned in a thunderous torrent of rushing water that poured down from forward. Jimmy Mizner thought fast, he had to.

Before the pressure of the incoming cataract was too great he caught hold of the engine room door and slammed it shut against the torrent, managed to get one dog clamp in place with one hand while he held the door tight by leaning his weight against it.

The water surged in though through the fissures around the door. It submerged the batteries and the lights blinked out. He was in total darkness. But he continued to clamp the dogs in place, one by one, and fumbling around with his hands in the absolute blackness, he managed to screw them tight.

Jimmy straightened then and paused to consider his situation. He had stopped the water from forward, but it welled up against the steel door and rumbled ominously. And he could sense that the boat was slowly sinking. The sensation filled him with horror thoughts. He knew that it would sink until it rested on the bottom. And how far was the bottom?

A hundred feet or so, well, if that was the case, there might be hopes. But more than that, well, he knew very well that the bulkhead door of the engine room would never withstand the pressure.

There came another gurgling of water and another groan. Jimmy walked gingerly down the aisle of the slowly sinking sub and sounded out the spot from where the water was coming. It was from a six inch valve high overhead that would have flooded the engine compartment in no time if he hadn't reached up and shut it off.

He managed to get it shut tight while just a trickle of water was running through. Then he paused again, and heard once more that painful, sighing groan. He stepped back towards the door, called in the black silence: "What—who?" But no answer came back to him but his own words, which echoed dully and thickly.

THE air began to get warm and stifling and he coughed. His throat burned and smarted. He knew what it was—the chlorine from the batteries. And the bulkhead door rumbled ominously again.

The water behind it was building up an intense pressure. He had to do something to build up the pressure inside his own compartment to counteract it. Water would do it. More water let in would tend to equalize that pressure. But he couldn't let the water in through the door. That water was impregnated with chlorine from the batteries, which now had been completely flooded.

He felt around some more, tried to think clearly, though his brain was on fire and a tortuous fever in-

vaded his whole body. The submarine stopped its sinking suddenly, bumped softly and came to rest. She was on the bottom.

Jimmy breathed a sigh of relief. The chlorine wasn't too bad. He coughed some and his nostrils smarted but his eyes weren't affected. That was the test. If his eyes burned it would have been too bad. He laid back against a stanchion in the blackness and tried to think of some means of escape. The square hatch overhead—that was it! He leaped up. But the pressure from the water outside? It would be impossible.

HE had to have more water—but where was he going to get it? He thought some more. The engine exhausts, of course. They opened outside and would let in water free from chlorine. He climbed back between the engines and opened a valve—a six inch one. The water came gushing in, and he felt his ear drums click while his head seemed to get thick and solid and felt heavy as lead. It was the added pressure he knew, but he had to have that pressure, and he had to stand it if he was going to lift the square hatch above the engines and escape through its opening.

The water was up to his waist now and had completely covered the tool boxes on the deck. Yet, he had to have tools to open the hatch above. He rested for a moment, then took a long breath and ducked his head beneath the water as he felt for the tool box. His hand came out gripping a wrench. Then in the darkness he clambered overhead and stood on the engines, applied his wrench to the nuts of the square hatch, turned them all off after much difficulty—all except one. This one was jammed and wouldn't give. He felt disappointed. But there was nothing to do about it but try some more. He went down again. The water was up to his armpits now when he stood on the deck. He took another deep breath and ducked beneath the surface, felt for a larger hammer and a sledge.

Once more he clambered on top of the engines and went to work on that recalcitrant nut. The chlorine in the smaller air space was getting bad. His eyes commenced to burn. Jimmy worked faster, and his breath came in fast, uneven gasps. He knew that there wasn't much more time. Already his movements were getting loggy and he felt sleepy, drowsy. But finally the nut gave and he knocked out the pins.

He pressed his shoulder against the lid and lifted. It moved, but the air sizzled through the slight opening and it clamped shut again, giving him a terrific thump on the head and catching his hand. A piercing pain shot up his arm. He became almost panicky for an instant, but he quickly stilled his violent emotions and despite the pain managed to work the handle of the wrench in between the hatch and support and pry it loose from his hand. But more air escaped through the opening and the hatch clattered shut with a loud report like a rifle burst.

THE pressure he had built up so painstakingly and carefully had been dissipated in an instant. He had to build it up again—but how? The water was over the engines now and within a few feet of the hatch.

There was only one way. He had to open the engine room door and let the water flood in from the forward compartment. Then the moment the pressure was built up he had to be waiting beneath the hatch, ready to be shot up with it when he again released the pins, which he

had to fasten in tight now to prevent the air from escaping.

Slowly, laboriously he went about his job, doing the whole task over again. With the pins firmly in place and lashed down firm with the nuts, he scrambled down off the engines and unloosed the dogs on the engine room door, working beneath the surface all the time, with long breaths that he drew from above.

A hundred times he had to go up and down and the last dog, or clamp, came very slowly. His last bit of strength was just about gone and the breath of life was slowly fading from him. But he opened it and the water rushed in torrentially, swept him to the far end of the engine room, where he thudded against a bulkhead and was thrust to the top, but still holding his wrench in his hand.

HE went to work again on the square hatch, worked feverishly, frantically, knowing that he had but a few moments of consciousness left.

But he got it loose—almost—when he again heard that moanful groan, and there were words, too.

"What, you leaving me here to die?"

Jimmy jerked as if he had been shocked by an electric current and his wide apart eyes stared into the blackness, but of course, saw nothing.

"Who—where?" he shouted, and an answer came back.

"Lieutenant Kennedy—here—above the engines. I—I—" Then the words broke off with an accompanying rush of water that lapped up clear to the hatch.

Jimmy's lips snarled and he hissed between his teeth, made to give a vicious twist on the last remaining nut before releasing the pins. But no! He shifted his wrench to one hand and felt along the top of the engines with the other. It encountered something yielding, warm to the touch.

He flung his one arm around the man's neck and made for the hatch again. The chlorine was suffocating. The pressure was intense. His whole body seemed on fire. He applied the wrench and gave a vicious twist. The last nut twirled off. He knocked the pins loose.

AND almost instantly he felt himself being shot up like a rocket through a medium that glowed blue and luminous, while a heavy weight seemed attached to his body.

Later, in the naval hospital ashore, it was the commandant of the submarine fleet who told Jimmy the rest of the story.

A regular steamer blown some few miles off its course by the storm had felt a sudden shock and then saw a submarine roll up under her bows. The steamer with a great hole in her bottom raced for the shore and made it, was beached safely. But the submarine sank before they could put out boats. Later when they did, all they found was an oil splotch on the sea where the boat had sunk.

But while they were searching, a figure with another entwined about it had shot gleaming out of the water, only to fall back on the surface just a few feet from their boat.

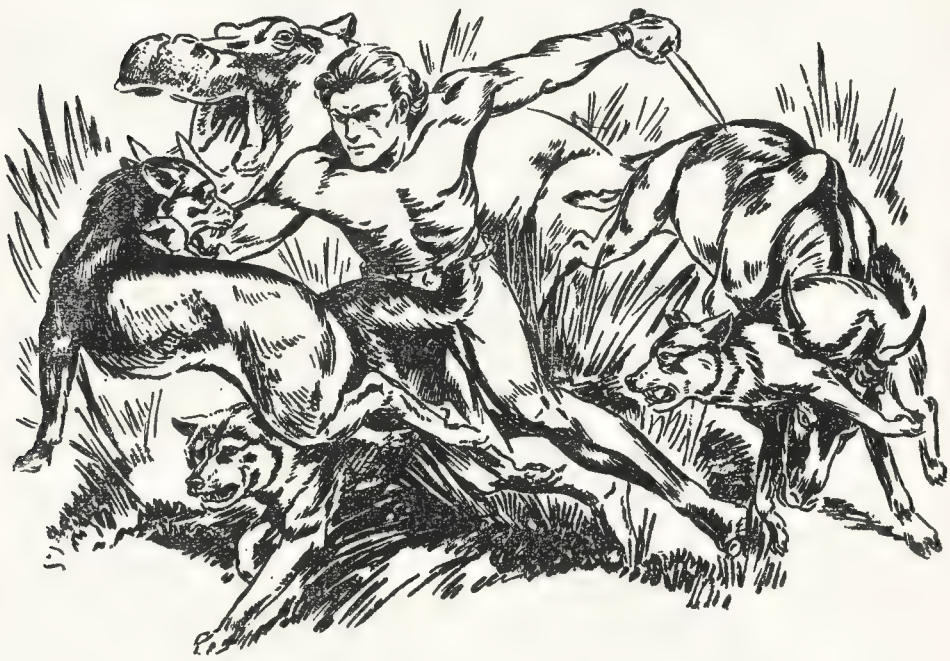
"And Kennedy?" Jimmy asked.

"He was dead when they picked him up. You were the only one saved."

"Oh," Jimmy gasped. "It's too bad. He was an excellent officer."

NEXT MONTH: "The Coiled Raja," a Colorful, Gripping Story of a Giant Cobra, by Perley Poore Sheehan.

Zalim, Master of the Wild Dogs, and Kwa, the Golden One, Meet in Deadly Combat



KWA *and the* Swamp Demon

By PAUL REGARD

Author of "Kwa of the Jungle," "Black Paradise," etc.

I

THE red African sun was just rising over the great swamp country, far to the east of the Devil Bush, when Kwa—he who was known as the Golden One, because of his yellow hair—heard a distant call for help. And instantly that call was not only supplemented by other cries, such as any man might have heard, but by a thousand messages in that silent radio of the jungle by which creatures of the wild spread afar their broadcasts of alarm.

"Zalim!" Kwa cried. "Zalim the Oppressor!"

And at once the zebra herd with which Kwa had been traveling through the great Grass Country milled close to where Kwa stood and began to circle about him.

Zalim was something—or someone—that all the people of the jungle

feared. Even mother elephants feared him, so long as they had young at their side. For the cunning of Zalim was incredible, and almost equal to his cunning was the bloodthirsty fierceness of his kind.

FOR Zalim was the leader of the wild dogs—the hunting dogs—the most terrible killers of all the killers of the wild.

"Zalim attacks a baby hippo," Kwa cried. "The mother hippo rushes in. Now Zalim and the whole pack are attacking both!"

Then, in an instant, Kwa sprang to the back of the zebra leader and the whole zebra herd were thundering off in the direction of the battle, for it had long been known that Kwa had threatened war on Zalim, the wild dog leader.

The ruffed eagles, vultures, cranes and herons—already circling aloft or going up from the swamps, the lakes and lazy rivers like swirls of smoke; and the ground-birds, from guinea-fowls to ostrich, they all fortified the original broadcast with broadcasts of their own.

"The Gerinti (the hippos) had been attacked by Zalim's killers and were fighting back."

A hippo bull was already plunging through the grass toward the battle-ground from the river where the herd dozed and played. The rest of the herd were following—shock after shock as the heavy creatures hit the bank, then rushed up and out.

All battles in which the wild dogs were attackers were apt to be brief. They could pull down an eland or a zebra almost within charging distance of a lion. And by the time the lion might have got there—which few lions would have cared to do—the victim would have already been shredded and swallowed.

Just as the big bull hippo came rushing onto the battleground, and while the hippo woman still fought for her own life and that of her calf, there came the equivalent of a silent shout through the heat, the mist and the blood-haze:

"Kwa! Kwa is here!"

The leader of the wild dog pack started to run. But just as he was sliding off into the grass, something struck him and he canted. He'd been hit by a lump of sun-dried clay.

II

KWA was almost as naked as the day he was born. He'd given up wearing clothes ever since that time—it seemed like long ago—that he'd made his way back into the Devil Bush from the African West Coast, after returning to Africa from America. All he wore by way of raiment was the twist of vine about his loins. It was a vine as tough as elephant sinew, and it served him as a belt for his knife. It had leaves like leather, and these were clothing enough.

For the rest, Nature had taken care of him. His head had a mane that would have done credit to a lion—to a young lion, at any rate. Nature had now gone even further and covered much of the rest of him with a golden down, until he himself was almost like a son of the Mu—the Furry Tribe, the Not Yet Men—the people who had reared him.

His movements also were more like those of some astonishing animal than those of a man—the movements of neither cat nor ape, but of one who'd been trained by these and had at last surpassed them.

"Ho! Ho! I am Kwa!"

It was a declaration of his, even as he flashed through the air from the zebra's back. He'd flung a clod and caught the leader of the dog-pack by the throat all in the same moment. The big white wild dog—

Zalim, meaning the Oppressor—had been but a shade less quick.

For the snatched fragment of a second he'd been able to rear and gnash. His fangs snapped like steel. But they closed on nothing but themselves. Then he and Kwa had thudded to the earth.

ALL this had happened so swiftly that Ta Hourt, the Great One, leader of the hippo people, had been unable to check his charge.

Just over the two on the ground, Ta Hourt now reared his tons of power—tons of tough fighting strength, like those of a whale; as quick in his flashes of movement as any wild boar.

All in an instant of time he'd flashed his question and received his answer.

"O Kwa, shall I crush him?"

"No!"

Ta Hourt came to earth. It was with a shock like the muffled explosion of a charge of dynamite.

"Make it a truce," Kwa told Zalim; "or I'll kill you myself!"

"Truce!"—the reply came out in a snapping growl.

The dogs fell away from the hippo woman. But one of the dogs—undisciplined or careless—made a snatch at a passing antelope. Then one of the amazing swift dramas within a drama that are always happening in the grass took place.

It looked as if the wild dog had been struck by a dragon-fly—one that had been hovering in the grass—and that the contact had suddenly turned the wild dog sick. Not until the thing was finished did anyone see that the supposed dragon-fly was the head of a *kassabuway*—one of those slim blue watersnakes that were friendly to hippos.

The wild dog lurched. It fell.

All this while the sun was still red on the flat horizon, while the mist still floated and lifted like the gauzy veil of some stupendous theatre.

And into this theatre of battle a drift of spectators—crocodiles hauling themselves from the smoky river and following the easy trails rolled through the grass by the charging hippos, elephants showing up through the veils of mist like thicker clouds.

Africa lags. But when it moves it can move with the speed of light.

There'd been no truce, however, in that battle of Kwa and the wild dog leader. No sooner had Zalim uttered that note of command to his pack than he seemed to have regretted it. He'd lurched again and for a moment was almost free.

There was a slavering streak like that of hot steel down Kwa's side. But Kwa had curved like a python and escaped the slash. Before Zalim could slash again, Kwa stabbed at Zalim, then once more got a throat-hold on the killer. But he'd lost his knife and was forced to roll, dragging his enemy with him as another killer-dog slipped in. Almost as hard to describe—the changes of this battle—as the changes of a gnat-quadrille spinning in the sun.

THE antelope saved by the stroke of the watersnake was still keyed to action. It was like a drawn bow and the arrow set. The antelope was a kudu—one of the shyest and most beautiful of all the antelope in Africa. A graceful tawny shape with delicate white stripes, a shapely head with spiraled horns.

As the second dog lunged at Kwa, the kudu struck it. It was as if the gray brute had been impaled on a rapier. There was a screech as the kudu tossed up its graceful head bearing that twisting, fighting burden as lightly as if the wild dog had been a bunch of grass.

"Truce!" Kwa roared.

And there was a flash of silence.

As long as he might live, Kwa would remember that flash of silence. It was a silence that as if struck into his soul—a silence that he himself engendered from a sense of horror and which now spread, distilling horror over the face of the world.

Sheer nightmare this was, and all the worse for happening in the pink and gold of dawn.

It had seemed to him just now that he himself was being strangled—that out of nowhere—out of nowhere earthly, at any rate—two hands—not paws, but hands—had closed about his own throat, even as he himself had tried to throttle the Oppressor.

III

I'M KWA," he said, as he shook himself free and held the Dog Chief by the throat.

And even as he said this, with his gray-blue eyes staring into the black and yellow eyes of the snarling mystery, he felt again a gust of eeriness as if, somehow, he'd seized—or been seized—by a ghost that was furred and fanged, surrounded by a flitting, stealthy horde of other ghosts.

Of the gray hunters there must have been all of two hundred by this time threading about. It was as if some sort of a spell had been cast over them to hold them where they were. Generally the wild dogs scoffed at fear. As long as they went about their regular business there was nothing that they could be afraid of.

In times of drought they could take possession of a water-hole, for instance, and hold it as long as they cared to. They didn't have to come slinking up to the water and sip and watch and slink away again like so many of the four-footed tribes. Not even the lions or the leopards cared to disturb them.

But they were frightened now.

This was Kwa. They'd heard of him. The jungle wireless was filled with the rumors and legends of Kwa—some of them, it appeared, of his own broadcasting. A White Man—an Otangani Angani—a White Man of the White Men—who could still speak all the tongues of the bush—talk with serpents, talk with leopards, talk with birds, and who could now talk with that Bwana Kalb, the Dog Chief, the Zalim, the Great Oppressor.

"Ho," said Kwa, "I was far over there in the direction of the setting sun—in the far-far place where I was born—back in the Valley of the Mu, of the Furry Tribe, they who are my people—and there, as we sat by the sacred fire in the great Fire Cave—lo, there came to us, like the voice of a dream—like a tale from the other side of the moon—the thought of one who called himself the Bwana Kalb, Master of the Wild Dogs—and, Zalim, thou art he!"

THE hold that Kwa had taken on the wild dog's throat was not a strangle hold. The wild dog has an outer skin that is exceedingly loose. Kwa had merely taken a two-handed grip in this outer skin as he might have held a dangerous hound.

"And when I knew the thing that was in thy mind," said Kwa, staring into the yellow-brown eyes that were close to his own, "I said: 'Lo, this is something that must not be'!"

Back in America or here in Africa Kwa had always been a friend and admirer of dogs. As for that, he'd often wondered where dogs had acquired their virtues—honesty, loyalty, patience, and so on; certainly not from the average man. But a voice in his brain now kept telling him that this was no dog at all whose eyes were glaring back at him now.

As for that, this was no mouth of

a dog that was panting into his face. It was too flaming red. The fangs were too curved, with an inward pitch, like those of certain ravenous fish. It was like the flashing glimpse of some horror half seen, by reflection, in the depths of a dusty and distorting mirror.

THE glimpse gave him a wrench that was at once both mental and physical. For the fraction of a second, he'd relaxed his hold.

There was a howl, and the horror that was a white wild dog had flung itself away from him. Kwa got the meaning back of the howl.

"Run!"

For a long time Kwa had been hearing strange stories of men who could change themselves into animals and of animals that could, at times, change themselves into a semblance of men. Africa is full of such stories, and also Africa is full of a sort of magic not suspected by the rest of the world.

Now, of this magic Kwa himself had seen many examples; but nothing had so filled him with horror as the suspicion that had come to him that Zalim, the leader of the wild dog clan, was himself a man.

After the battle with the wild dogs, it was Ta Hourt, the Great One, leader of the hippo herd, who was able to tell Kwa most about this ancient and dangerous magic. Ta Hourt carried in that great brain of his the stories—and much of the experience—of all the magic that had come down through Africa from the dawn of time in Egypt.

Ta Hourt told Kwa of certain tribes of Black Gypsies—magicians to a man—who still lived in what was Africa's No Man's Land; in the vast region of mingled, shifting swamp and desert, there where the Sahara gradually merges into the great River Country.

There were many tribes of Black Gypsies, so old Ta Hourt said. There were the Messalit, the Fellata, the Bongo, the Kobbi—all of them dealers in magic and breakers of the ancient law that like should not eat like.

"Could you imagine me," Ta Hourt droned, "eating the leg of some young hippo bull I'd happened to kill in a natural battle?"

"No, I couldn't," said Kwa.

"Well the Kobi tried to get my people to do that sort of thing once," said Ta Hourt. "And when I chased them out, they turned to the killer dogs. That's how the dogs have come by damnation and the one who brought them to this sin was Zalim, the Oppressor, Demon of the Swamps."

"Lo, for the sake of the dogs," said Kwa, "then take me to the demon's lair."

IV

THERE'S this about magic; and the more you look into it the more probable it seems to be—that magic can survive in some places and not in others, just like certain plants, certain animals, certain tribes. Just as it is with many things. They can grow and flourish in some places while in others they wither and perish.

So with magic. Africa is full of it. Today as it always has been. Hard-headed white men, once they've lived in Africa long enough—down in Black Africa—come to believe in magic as much as any native. And they do this because they have to believe the evidence of their senses—sight, touch, hearing, smell, and taste.

Black men who can play with scorpions—who have become "friends of scorpions," as they are called. Others who can swim in rivers haunted by man-eating crocodiles.

Whole tribes—especially the Black Gypsy tribes Ta Hourt knew—who have kept the "Dark Science" of Egypt alive; who are weavers of magic rope, trappers of souls; living so close to the borderline between animal and man that they seem to be able to cross over that border at will.

As the gray wild dogs ghosted away from the scene of their unlucky foray they kept together more or less. But not for long.

Even as they ran they were getting orders from the leader—from the Bwana Kalb, Zalim, the Great Oppressor.

By twenties and thirties the horde broke up until only a scant fifty remained with the leader—white, rangy, with a narrowed stare in his yellow eyes.

The Bwana Kalb ran with a slight limp in his right foreleg, there where the point of Kwa's knife had slit him, during the battle.

Yet even so he was at the head of the kill as he and his pack surrounded an eland family—a buck and his doe and two young ones—and slashed them to pieces almost before they could fall. The elands, in fact, scarcely touched the ground at all except as scattered bones and offal.

BLOOD and meat and tender vital parts—these all disappeared into the ravening throats of the leader's pack with an unbelievable speed that was, in itself, like some Satanic magic.

Not long after that the wild dogs—moving more slowly now—came to a copse of dense forest standing like an island in the limitless expanse of mudflat and marsh. Sated and sleepy and eager for dreams, the wild dogs, with Zalim at their head, crept into the green shadows.

They went ahead until they were almost in the center of the forest clump—there where the ground was high; and here they bedded down in a thicket of fern. No place could have been better chosen as a sleeping place for animal or man, while the sun rode high and the heat became oppressive. The fern had a very pleasant smell—yet a smell it seemed, that kept the ants away. There were many dried fronds, and these covered the ground like an acre-broad mattress.

A SMALL honeybird, always on the outlook for strangers—and noisy in its greeting of them, too, as a rule—came and looked at the drowsy wild dogs. Just a glance was enough. It was gone again without a sound.

No other creature came that way at all—not even a lizard. There was one large and beautiful lizard—the sort called an agama—who had her nest in the fern thicket. But she'd fled at the coming of the wild dogs. She didn't return again.

The wild dogs, sleeping, were more like other dogs than when they hunted. They turned round and round before bedding down, then formed a magic circle—each of his own body—with head to tail. And, like that, each dog knew that his soul could not escape and wander away. It was necessary to watch your soul like that, in case of a sudden awakening.

Nowhere in Black Africa was it regarded as a safe thing to awake someone too suddenly. Suppose his soul was far away. The soul might not be able to get back before the sleeper rambled off somewhere, and so the soul would be lost.

Like sleeping dogs, these sleepers lay very still. All except one.

Zalim, the leader, found he couldn't sleep. His wounded foreleg was bothering him. At last, silently, while the others slept,

he got up from his bed of fern and limped off slowly through the woods.

AS he went, he sniffed here and there, and finally he got wind of the thing he wanted. With his sound paw he turned a rotted branch that lay in the mould, then, with a quick snap of his muzzle seized a fluttering creature that appeared to be half-snake, half-bird—a sort of winged lizard.

This he carried with him—gingerly, tenderly—down to a spring that flowed clear at the bottom of a slope. And there, in the clear water, submerged it and swallowed it, so that he seemed to be drowning it and eating it at the same time.

A long process, while all the time, Zalim kept his muzzle under water, shoulders hunched, his round and furry ears erect.

But as he did this—as he rested there absolutely motionless—as if waiting for the bird-snake to dissolve, another sort of transformation was taking place. The straining forelegs turned to hands and arms. They were smooth and black as ebony. The head changed color and shape—black and round, with only the furry ears keeping some hint of what they just had been.

And instead of the wild dog coming up from its crouch at the side of the spring, it was a black man—naked except for the skin of a wild dog that he wore slung from one shoulder like a mantle. Rather undersized, but sinewy, powerful, with the distended stomach of a man who has gorged. Zalim, the wild dog, had become Zalim, the man.

He had a glowering face, a little distorted, with blood-red gums that showed through loose-hung lips. His teeth were spaced apart, pointed and slanting in, like the teeth of a baracuda.

Zalim! Zalim Khalis! Hell's Own Oppressor!

Zalim spoke a little Arabic—enough to swear with; in which respect Arabic is rich and most of the native tongues are not so good.

Zalim swore now—*"Wahyat rasak!"* meaning "By thy head!"—only head wasn't the word Zalim really used—a he studied the long slit down his forearm. But he washed the cut in the spring, then plastered it with mud on which he spat. After which—still as a man—he went back among the sleeping wild dogs—who may have been no more wild dogs than he was himself—and there he slept through the heat of the day.

Late in the afternoon, they were all awake. They were off again toward Zalim's camp. It would have been strange—even to an oldtimer in Africa—Black Africa—to have seen that pack of gray killers, four-footed and furred, running off through the woods and out onto the caked mudflats with a single black man at their head.

But none saw them—no human eyes; unless the eyes of the pack were human. This was what the natives called, in a hundred dialects, "the Danger Country"—land of a thousand dangers, many of which were of things not seen. A lonely country, deserted and weird, smelling of death, creepy—almost anyone would have said—with all the myriad ghosts of old Black Africa.

"I had a dream," droned Zalim. "Tonight, we feed on man."

V

KWA also had slept away the heat of the day—in the shade of a bush along the river's edge where the Gerinti people could keep an eye on him while they lay submerged and only the knobs of their eyes and nostrils out.

Also Kwa dreamed. But his dreams had been of pleasant places and pleasant things—of Palm Beach and Newport dissolving into moonlit nights in the Devil Bush. And again, as ever and ever in his sleep, people were animals and animals were people—regardless of how they talked or the sort of clothing they wore—same problems, same hurts, same loves, same stumbling migration along the narrow, thorny trail that both animals and men call life.

He got the news when he awoke that the hippo mother and her calf the wild dogs had attacked were dead. The undertaker crocodiles had already drifted them away.

There was no mourning, though, among the Gerinti people because of this. The sun was hazy in the West. The river flowed. There was good grass along the shore. Death—just another sundown, as Ta Hourt said. That was part of the Ancient Wisdom of the Bush.

"When my times comes," said Kwa—

"When thy time comes, O Kwa?"

"I hope," said Kwa, "I'll be as brave as a hippo mother."

"That reminds me," said Ta Hourt. "If you will feed on milk and honey, on fruit and lily roots, you'll find enough for a thousand of your slim girth. After which, we'll be on our way."

"I was raised on the stuff you mention," Kwa said. "We'll feed and be on our way."

There'd be no moon until the middle of the night. But the stars swung low. The breadth of the river itself was like a sky-track studded with stars. Until some big silver fish jumped high and became the sliver of a shattered moon. Only to fall again and send up a fountain of silver sparks.

Kwa swam with the hippo herd about him. Or he floated and allowed himself to be towed—by a strand of waterweed held in Ta Hourt's huge mouth. Again he rode in swift silence on Ta Hourt's back.

So silent was the swimming of the Gerinti people that they'd traveled far before Kwa was even aware that a dozen other hippo bulls were coming along at Ta Hourt's bidding. They'd gone on for other swift and silently gliding spaces when sky and river were merged before Kwa discovered that also there were unnumbered crocodiles about—more silent even than the hippos.

AND through all this, some hangover of his dreams—so strange a world is that inside the skull of a man—dreams of Palm Beach and Newport, of thronged streets in New York and Chicago. All this a part of this same world that contained Black Africa—and as if present, here and now—on this lost river that had no name, where the people were hippo and crocodile and fish.

Then, overspreading the silence but not seeming, somehow, to break it, a shimmer of frog and insect music. If you listened to it, it deafened you. If you didn't listen to it, you didn't hear it. It was like a bell of sound shutting in the nearer silence.

In a silence like this, Kwa stretched out on the barge-like back of Ta Hourt—his head close to Ta Hourt's head and the beating of his own heart as if tuned in to the steady rhythm of Ta Hourt's heart—and Kwa could see and hear all that Ta Hourt thought and felt as if he were leaning over the balcony rail of some theater.

"Danger Land!"—said Ta Hourt, referring to the dark country that unreeled along the shores. "Country of ghosts! All sorts of ghosts, animals and men! Can't you see them, Kwa?"

"No! Can you, Ta Hourt?"

"See with my eyes," Ta Hourt said.

Kwa closed his eyes and saw—saw as Ta Hourt and so many animals—all of them, maybe—see with those eyes of theirs that are open to a wider range of light than are the eyes of men.

It wasn't a pretty spectacle—slaves by the thousands, with wooden yokes and chains to keep them in place, each slave weighted with an elephant tusk or sometimes two. It was all whip and gun and murder.

"These ghosts, Ta Hourt—they are of the past," Kwa said.

"All ghosts live in the past," Ta Hourt replied. "That's the air they breathe. But the past is here. It rides along with us like the shadow of ourselves—like that shadow now, cast by the moon."

The moon was coming up.

WHILE it was still low, Ta Hourt and his people left the river—making no more sound than otters as they did so—and struck out across country. The hippos spread out, traveling far apart and slowly, now, for there was danger of setting off any sort of an alarm.

For this was the country of Zalim himself—Zalim's "ghost farm," as Ta Hourt referred to it in the silent speech he knew how to use. And far off to either side, there came whispers from the crocodiles, who were also traveling overland—whispers that were like voices from some other ghostly world.

This was like no world that Kwa had ever known, even in Africa. A haunted zone where past and present merged, light and dark, the living and the dead, swamp and desert.

A black, flat country, under a lopsided moon.

Then they came to what looked like a shoreless stretch of dead water—a *dahl,* as it was called in the local dialect—a sheet of water drawn across a wide morass of such treacherous depth and consistency that it might have sucked down even a hippopotamus to destruction.

It was in places like this that the raiders used to drive the elephant herds, then butcher them at leisure while they slowly sank and chopped out their precious ivory. A graveyard since the world began, so Ta Hourt said; and still hungry for other victims.

BUT the crocodiles knew the place. The crocs, in ways of their own, had found a dozen trails across the shaking depths, and they now became the guides. They crept. They slithered. Now and then the crocs turned to look back, to make sure that they were correctly followed or that they were keeping the proper trail; and at such times the lopsided moon would catch a green reflection in their eyes and put it in Kwa's memory to linger there as the march went on.

It was in the midst of this lake of death that the Oppressor—who, after all, was the devil of the place—the demon of the swamp—had elected to make his home.

Zalim! Zalim Khalis! Khalis, meaning hell. Evidently, thought Kwa, the devil felt at home in hell. And he wondered if he, Kwa, was equal to the job that lay ahead. He looked at the moon. He looked at the stars. Most of them he recognized. They were almost like stars lifted from the flag back home in America.

It had been decided. There was to be no killing—unless Kwa himself said so—not even if Kwa himself should be killed. Because, Kwa argued, what was the cunning of even a heart and a brain like Ta Hourt's against a heart and a brain like Zalim's?

And who was about to die—he him-

self, Kwa, or Zalim; the demon of this swamp? Death was near for someone. Of that he was sure.

VI

THE only human natives who lived at all in this part of the world were a few scattered Dinkas—outcasts, most of them, because of various crimes they might have committed. Ill health was a crime. So was possession of "the evil eye." And the worst crime among the Dinka people, was to be a bringer of bad luck.

As for the rest, the Dinka tribesmen were built like storks, skinny and tall. Like storks, balancing on one leg when they rested! subsisting largely on frogs; with an air of brooding silence and mystery.

On their way back to Zalim's town, the wild dogs, or such as passed for wild dogs, had made a long detour and surrounded a solitary Dinka they'd found out in the swamps.

When the Dinka saw that he was surrounded by the dogs, he made no effort to get away. He knew that that would be useless. He was a bad-luck exile, anyway, and he might as well die now as anytime and without a struggle. His time had come.

Even when the Dinka came to the passage of the *dahl*—that bottomless graveyard, the nature of which he instantly recognized—he allowed himself to be steered by the wild dogs along the invisible, winding trail which was hidden by the dead waters of the place.

When he reached an island of elephant grass in the middle of the lake it was just sunset time, and it was as if the whole world had—for the moment—been turned to blood—blood-red water, blood-red sky, and, at last, a cluster of huts half of which seemed stained with blood and half stained purple.

All of which meant death.

"We'll eat him," Zalim said, "after the moon comes up."

Instead of tying the Dinka in the ordinary way, Zalim himself had fitted onto the Dinka's lean neck one of the old Arab slave yokes, of which there were still hundreds lying about on this island.

With this in place, the Dinka had seated himself on the ground to wait for death and wonder what it would be like. Death meant nothing very bad to him. In fact, since time out of mind, his people chose death of their own accord when they were old and tired of living; and the manner of their choice was to be buried alive.

But, as the blood drained out of the world and left a blackness and then a fire blazed up, the Dinka saw something that roused him from this indifference.

The wild dogs were talking. Now and again a dog would arise from his place near the fire and go into a hut. No dog came out. Only another man. But each man with blood-red gums, with pointed teeth.

Now and then, the dog-men turned and looked at him and laughed with a braying chatter that was like the laughter of wild dogs.

IT was just as the moon was rising over the hedge of elephant grass that the Dinka sprang to his feet. The slave-yoke was almost strangling him. But he lifted that log of hard-wood and whirled it about him in a sort of dance. Still holding it aloft and dancing like a stork in mating time, he plunged out into the grass, out into the morass. It was as if a call had reached him from his ancestors. Out there, at least, he could be buried alive.

Kwa saw that staggering apparition of a black slave coming in his direction. This ghost, at least, was not of the past. This one he could

save. And then the Dinka saw Kwa.

The man had lowered his pole. He would have run, but he could run no further.

There was a legend among the Dinkas that some day an Inlaga—a white spirit who would be the friend of crocodiles and hippos—would come into the Dinka world and dispense great blessings.

The Dinka would have fallen to his knees. But he couldn't do even that, because of the slave yoke.

But in a moment Kwa was jerking free the pin of the yoke. He was calling to the Dinka—now in English, now in a smattering of many dialects—not to be afraid, that they were brothers.

AS a matter of fact, it would have been the same had Kwa spoken Greek, or French. It was the thought back of the words that reached the Dinka's brain, even as such speech might have reached the mind of any man so nearly animal as Dinka was.

Yet the Dinka searched through all the words he knew that might appeal to an "Inlaga." There was only one. He'd learned it long ago while he'd been the slave of an Arab trader. The word was—*"Allah!"*

"Ho!" cried Kwa. "Allah!"

And then, while he could see the crocodiles slithering away through the dim moonlight to surround the island to see that none should escape, and while the Gerinti herd, with Ta Hourt in the lead, closed in on the doomed capital of dread that was the devil's own home, Kwa, with that gangling black shadow at his back, plunged ahead across what remained of the trail.

At the flight of the black Dinka there'd been a chorus of shouts and curses. But Zalim only had been quick to act. He'd sprung for one of the huts. He came out on the run with a gun in his hands.

He was just in time to sense that gust of panic that had hit his band.

With the rising moon a breeze also had risen. And just now the breeze had struck across the camp with a taint of crocodiles, a taint of hippos, then that other taint which this day Zalim and his kind had learned both to hanker for and dread.

There was a whispered cry of "Kwa!" It came like a gasp.

Then, there was Kwa, himself.

Zalim threw up his gun to fire. Before he could steady his arm a steel blade—Kwa's k n i f e—flashed through the fire and struck him, point on, through the heart.

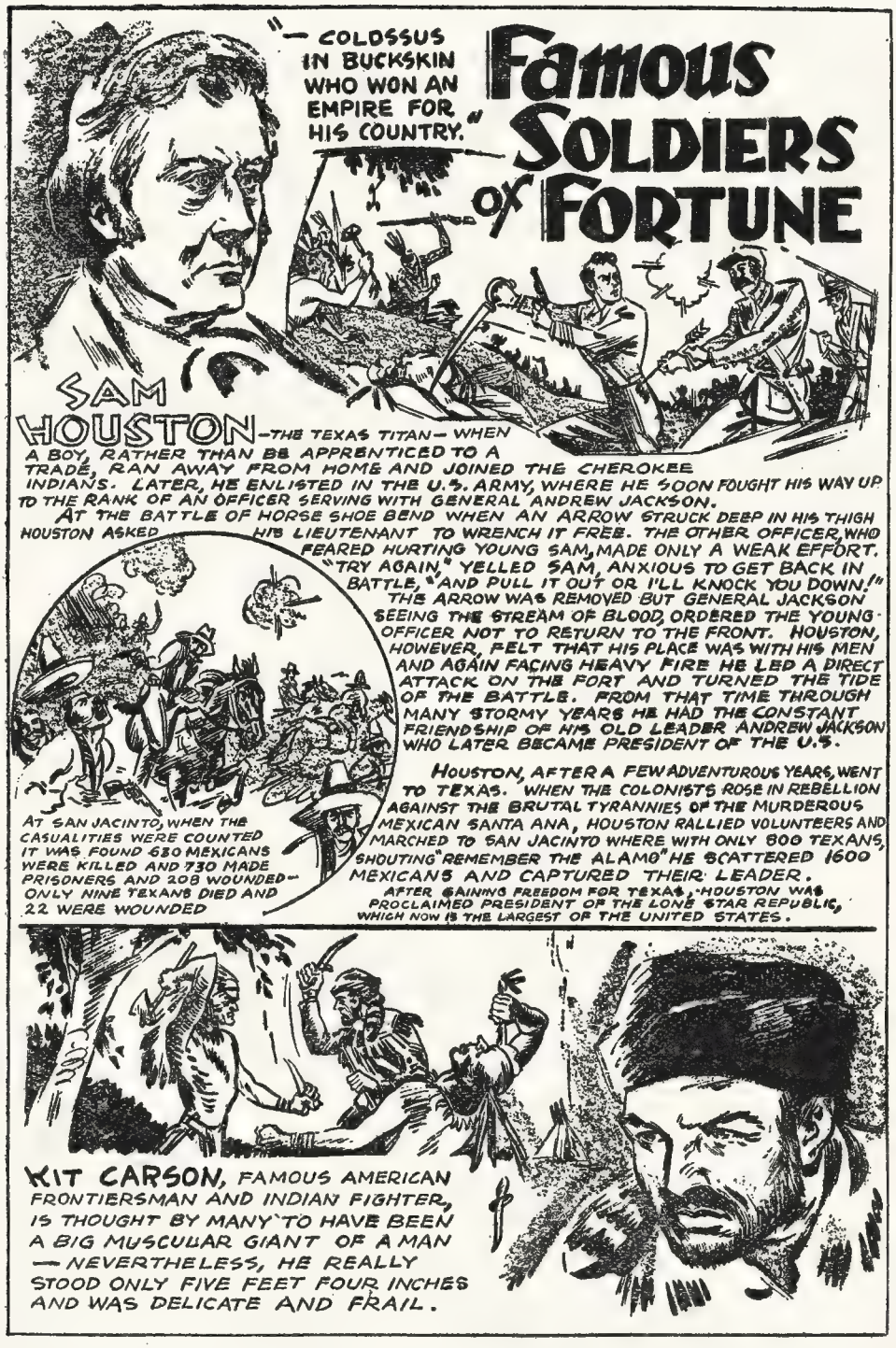
Just back of Kwa was a dancing lank shadow armed with a ten-foot log of heavy wood, the slave yoke, the relic of many a ghost out there in the dark.

For a while, Kwa was leaning over the body of Zalim looking at the long fresh streak of a wound in one of his forearms. It was there that his knife had slashed at the wild dog, this day.

TA HOURT and his people were knocking over the huts—knocking them over so that they'd fall in the fire. The Dinka, feeling that he was looking on things that he had no right to see, was gone. There was no danger of his being lost in a swamp. He belonged to a people who were brothers to the crane. And he felt that now, anyway, his luck was definitely changed. He'd go back to his village and tell the elders of this marvel. Maybe they'd give him a *karama*—a celebration.

In the shadows, the crocs were waiting. They were always there for the end of the feast. But they let the Dinka pass. They'd have Zalim and his pack for food this night.

"Come on," said Kwa to Ta Hourt. "Let's go home while there's yet a moon."



This is the Original Illustrated Adventure



GEN. CHARLES "CHINESE" GORDON WAS FAMOUS FOR HIS BRAVERY UNDER THE HOTTEST FIRE. BECAUSE OF HIS DISREGARD OF FEAR THE CHINESE BELIEVED GORDON TO POSSESS A "SACRED LIFE." YET, AS A CHILD, HE WAS VERY TIMID. AT CORFU, WHERE HIS FATHER, AN ENGLISH OFFICER, HELD COMMAND, YOUNG CHARLES WAS SO AFRAID OF GUNS THAT HE WOULD RUN AWAY AND HIDE HIS HEAD TO ESCAPE THE SOUND OF FIRING. LATER, TO CURE HIMSELF OF THIS FEAR AND HIS COWARDICE, HE WOULD OFTEN THROW HIMSELF BOLDLY FROM A SHIP INTO DEEP WATER, THOUGH UNABLE TO SWIM, TRUSTING TO THE SAILORS TO PULL HIM OUT AGAIN.

AS A LIEUTENANT DURING THE CRIMEAN WAR, WHEN HIS MEN CROWDED UNDER THE EARTHWORKS TO ESCAPE THE RUSSIAN FIRE, HE WOULD LEAD CERTAIN ONES OF THEM UPON THE RAMPARTS, "TO TEACH THEM UNDER FIRE MANNERS," WHILE THE STORM OF LEAD SWEPT ROUND THEM. AFTER EIGHT YEARS OF VARIED SERVICE IN MANY LANDS MAJOR GORDON WENT TO SHANGHAI WHERE HE TOOK OVER THE COMMAND OF THE "EVER VICTORIOUS ARMY" AND CRUSHED THE FIERCE TAIPING REBELLION.

WHEN BRITAIN SENT HIM, IN 1884, TO THE SUDAN WITH ONLY A FEW MEN, HE WAS SURROUNDED IN KHARTUM BY THE FIERCEST OF THE ARABS. AS THE MADHISTS ENTERED THE TOWN HE LED HIS FEW MEN AGAINST THEIR THOUSANDS IN AN EFFORT TO PROTECT THE NATIVE WOMEN AND CHILDREN — HE DIED, THE BRAVEST OF THE BRAVE. CHINA HAS THREE TEMPLES AND ENGLAND A GORDON COLLEGE ERECTED TO THE MEMORY OF THIS FAMOUS SOLDIER.



MITHRIDATES, THE GREAT KING OF PONTUS (63 B.C.) COULD SPEAK 104 DIFFERENT DIALECTS OF THE TWENTY FIVE NATIONS THAT HE RULED.



WHEN SOLDIERS CHARGE THEY DO **NOT** RUN — THEY WALK.



GERMANY WAS NOT THE FIRST NATION TO USE GAS IN WARFARE — CHINA USED IT FOR CENTURIES.

Feature—the First to Appear in Any Magazine

Continue This Weird and Exciting Serial of

The Prowling Creature

A Three-Part Serial

By CAPT. KERRY McROBERTS

Author of "Legion of the Frontier," "White Sands," etc.



PART TWO

SYNOPSIS

London looks strange to James B. Ryder, or "Buck," famous adventurer, after years of thick green forest paths and miles of white and blue beach. But in London he is, being feted by his friend Chester Sanford, an American theatrical producer, and two beautiful, successful actresses, Alice Grannis and Diana Carleton. From a night club, the party decide to drive out to an animal farm owned by Joe Colletti. Sanford has promised Alice a leopard kitten to match her fur coat, and they set out in gay spirits.

They arrive at the desolate animal farm, filled with all the sights and smells of the jungle, to be confronted with grim tragedy. Joe Colletti has been murdered—beaten to death. His helper, the mute Dummy Harlow, tries vainly to give them information about the crime, or so it seems to them. But all he can do is utter incomprehensible sounds. Meanwhile the animals are restless. The smell of fresh blood is in the air. It is maddening them. Ryder and Sanford try to call Scotland Yard. It is impossible, for the wires have been cut and there is no method of communication.

From Joe Colletti's office there suddenly come strains of music. Buck and Sanford go to investigate, leaving the girls outside the office on the grounds. The men hear footsteps, but see nobody. Gunga, a huge Gorilla, savagely pounds at his cage, and the detonations are terrifying. Suddenly, from outside the building, comes a piercing scream—the voices of the girls joined together in a wail of agony. Ryder makes a leap for the door and the stairs.

Now Go On With the Story.

CHAPTER V

The Sinister Phantom

THE blunt brutal head of Kaa rose slowly. His dull, dead-looking, lusterless shoe button eyes were studying the small space of light. A strange light, for the door to his cage was open. It was not for a twenty-four foot rock python to figure how or why, or to even guess that a cunning vicious demon hand had opened it with a reason.

It was enough that the killer found his way to freedom clear. The thick



heavy coils began to slide and slip; coils as thick as a big man's thigh. The armor-shod battering ram of a head touched the half open door with a quick tap, such a sound as a small hammer would make against the side of a steel safe.

The door moved outward and Kaa, the crusher, hungry after a long, long sleep, raised his head—two, three feet—from the floor of his cage, until the roof just grazed his horny snout. Then, silent, smooth and swift he lowered it. Out through the door the head went and after it, yard upon yard, came the body of the only real fighter in the world of serpents. Kaa was free.

The blood scent was in his iron-clad nostrils. His long undulating body slid swiftly along by the cement wall that was a foundation for the row of animal buildings. The gravel grating against him, felt good, but the flesh hunger gnawed inside of him, and forty feet away he saw a man.

THE Dummy halted in his tracks and dropped his hands from the empty pushcart. His eyes popped from his head in a fierce terror that held him, fascinated, muscles gripped by a power unseen. He saw the huge snake slowly coming toward him. His feet were fastened to the ground. His open mouth gave out a plaintive, feeble sound that should have been a great shout of horror, a warning, an alarm. The thing was getting nearer, and still his feet—

He tried to turn and run, to fling an arm across his eyes to shut the sight from him, but his body would not respond. Drops of clammy sweat fell from his chin and he tried to take a full breath. He was falling, leaning, losing his balance. Then it was that he felt himself walking, his eyes held in the mystic spell of

the approaching giant serpent. He was moving backward, step by step. His feet dragged as if his shoes were filled with lead.

BACKWARD through the narrow cage street he tottered. He saw the snake veer off as it reached the empty pushcart; saw the blunt head of steel raised, swinging, as if to search the cart.

Then on it came again. No sound came from the Dummy now. He was as silent as the reptile itself, and now he was out of the narrow path, out into the broad clear space before the two houses. But he continued groping, his back to the automobile, until the vicious, undulating body came in sight of the two girls who witnessed for a brief awe stricken moment the drama that was being enacted before their staring eyes.

Then both girls screamed. Shrill, intense, the cry burst from the throats of Alice and Diana as they realized the nearness of the thing. The sound of their screams knifed into the torpored senses of the Dummy and released him from the overpowering spell that was inch by inch slowing his retreat. With a startled gurgle, he turned and saw them, then waved his arms frantically. Mad panic seized his features, made his face look like a demon's, and he ran crazily toward the door of Colletti's office.

Out of this door shot Buck Ryder and Chet Sanford to plunge to the ground and stare, frozen to a halt at the sight that greeted them.

"I'll be—" Buck broke out with a muffled oath, unabashed even before the girls. He waved his hand at them, and saw the girls remain rooted to the ground. They were unable to move.

"Don't stand there!" he shouted, his eyes on the sliding body of the python. He made a jump toward them, and Sanford yelled something unintelligible as he flung himself at Alice Grannis.

Buck looked around quickly, seeking a place of safety for the girls and themselves. Every moment the big snake was getting nearer. What it was after, Buck did not stop to imagine, but he knew enough of its habits to be sure it was the great Indian crusher. And Ryder had been in India.

He had no weapon. There was nothing near him to use against a creature of this breed.

"Run," shouted Sanford, who made no move himself, and seemed not to know which way to turn. "Buck—!"

"Here!" yelled Buck, grabbing Diana bodily. "Into the machine, quick!" He looked around for the Dummy and saw that the poor fellow was fixed like a half broken puppet, leaning forward, in the center of the yard, his eyes following the swaying head.

WITH a final call in the Dummy's direction, Buck sprang for the automobile. As he climbed into the car he ordered the windows closed, shoved the dazed Sanford out of the driving seat and rammed his foot against the starter. He had his mind made up already, a mind trained to act swiftly in emergencies—and a body equal to the battle.

The motor coughed, then roared out a blast of power and Buck shoved the gears into reverse. With a lurch he rammed the car to the rear, his eyes keeping the gigantic serpent in line.

"Don't scream," he cautioned the girls. "I'm doing the only thing open to us now. Keep the windows closed."

Then he shot the car forward. He and Sanford, being in front, saw the long curling body before them. They saw the head raised suddenly, and the glitter of the eyes that flamed

now with the fighting instinct of the jungle's most terrible killer. Buck swerved, swinging the wheel. They felt the dull shock on the tires as the suddenly swift-moving python whipped his body forward. Buck felt it harder through the wheel, felt the thrashing of the thick body under them, heard the smashing attack against the bottom of the car. Then the wheels slipped and the machine dropped to the ground.

Without knowing why, Buck instinctively pushed the car forward. Came another block to the rear wheels, and Buck shoved the power home, crawling slowly, carefully, until he felt the car was up, had climbed the python's writhing body with the heavy rear wheels.

"It's our only chance," he said quietly now, trying to impart some of his reserve calm to the others, as he pulled up the hand brake tight and threw the car out of gear. "Listen!"

WHIPPING itself about in a wild fury the snake, pinned beneath the weighted car, battered at the auto body now. How much of its length from the head back was free, Buck Ryder did not know, but he and all the others knew that something was smashing viciously at the broad side of the machine. Like blows from a sledge hammer. Ryder hoped the thing was caught high enough up to prevent it reaching the windows with its hammering head.

As he put his hand on the door handle beside him, he turned to Sanford. The machine was trembling with the shock of the snake's attack. They even felt it lurch, and Ryder wondered if the weight would hold the monster.

"You be ready, Chet," he ordered, motioning to the controls. "I'm going to make a try at killing it."

Both women cried out to him, but Buck was gone. He had slammed the door and made a broad jump from the running board, sprinting away some fifty feet before he slowed and looked back. What he saw must have assured him that he had a chance. He shouted at the transfixed Dummy.

"Got an axe?" he yelled, showing the nearly hypnotized Englishman by motions what he wanted.

The Dummy opened his mouth, nodded his head, and ran away to a tool shed to come back promptly with a bright serviceable looking axe. Buck took it and started toward the machine. He saw the faces of those inside, their mouths agape with fright, and now as he came around the car he saw the lashing, smashing body of Kaa, the killer.

Buck Ryder measured the length of the snake's free body, gauged the possible swing of the head, watched it with a strange feeling of weakness as the blunt, hard scaled head was slammed again and again against the heavy steel body of the machine. He saw the coils of the huge body wrapped and intertwined around the differential, the springs and the cable-like grip of the tail squeezed about the steel arm that held the spare.

"Here goes," said Buck coldly and half to himself.

HE edged up carefully, timing the head as it battered madly against the car. With a firm grip on the axe handle he drew back. Slam! The python rammed its bony beak against the now badly dented body. Buck Ryder swung—and missed. He heard Diana cry out from inside, and he staggered past, feeling a chill grip his legs.

He never knew the huge snake could be so quick, or that he could have come so near to getting the

smashing blow that came at him like a streak of light.

But he was braced now at a safe distance, and he swung again. This time he felt the crash of contact, felt the bite of the axe blade as it chopped into the thick body just below the head. The snake was threshing now, beating backward and forward, smashing itself against the body, the fender, the ground.

BUCK flung himself backward from the crimson splash and remembered the iron bar he had held a short while ago. Running to the stoop of the house, he caught it up and returned. It was longer than the axe, heavier, though unwieldly. However, with a careful aim, he brought it around in a sizzling arc, just in time to meet the snake below the head. The blow had all of Buck's weight in it and almost tore the cruel head from the spine.

Buck glanced around and drew out a handkerchief to wipe his face. He wondered where the Dummy had gone. The snake was jerking back and forth. Buck flung the iron bar across its slowly shifting, lowering head.

Chet Sanford opened the car door cautiously.

"You did it?" he appeared almost incredulous, skeptical. Then he glanced down and saw the jerking head. "Do you think that thing got out by accident, Buck?"

Ryder was standing silently, wrapt in thought. He was thinking of the same thing, and pondering the idea that perhaps it had been part of some fiendish plot to either kill or frighten off whoever might become curious around the animal farm—while a murderer was planning to escape.

"I don't know, Chet," answered Ryder, "but I do know this. We are getting into the car and out of here and find one of those Bobbies or a constable or whatever they have out here. Now look. I'll walk up there by the fence, and you can drive up while I watch to see if this crawling devil is dead."

SANFORD nodded. He appeared nervous and slammed the door. Ryder walked away and made a motion when he got twenty feet beyond. The Broadway play producer shot the car forward, swung it around near Ryder who was watching the snake, and as the thing showed no sign of life, Buck yanked open the car door, asked Diana for a cigarette, just to break the ice, and the car rolled away toward the big gate.

"We can run the girls over to Benfleet Station," declared Sanford, as he rolled down the window beside him. "They'll be all right there with—"

"You'll take them into London—" Buck had begun to speak when from behind them—it was undoubtedly in Colletti's house—they heard the strangest strangling cry. It sent shudders down the spines of all four and Chet Sanford's feet jumped on the pedals, stopping the car as if it had struck the side of a fort.

"What in the name of hell?" cried Buck, throwing open his door. "Somebody is being killed. Wait, Chet!" Ryder was standing now on the ground looking toward the house. "Maybe we'll get a look at this mystery demon. Shhh! Listen."

As if the red terror in that garbled cry had sent some coded message to the streets of cages, the roaring and coughing of the lions and tigers ceased. No other sound followed. There was no sequel to the shriek that fled skyward from that building. A tense, dread silence spread over Colletti's animal farm, a silence loaded with danger, filled with the threat of some dire disaster. Then

a lark rose from the bubbling swamp outside and sailed into the leaden sky, singing.

Buck Ryder's eyes shifted toward the occupants of Sanford's car. He passed a wink to Chet, then he was gone.

At the door of the office he paused and shot the door in suddenly, leaving it full open. In a single stride he stood in the big room. On the floor near the table where Ryder had only a short time ago tried to use the telephone, lay the body of a man, face up, arms settling even then in the coldness of death.

"By the great damnation!" Buck let the oath drip from his teeth as he stared at the face of the dead man.

It was Dummy Harlow. Poor tongueless Dummy. Dead as quick as that. And not a sound or sign of the murderer. Had the Dummy seen the man who killed his employer, Joe Colletti? Ryder made a quick survey of the room and shook his head resignedly. Not a single clue.

Only that the Dummy had been strangled. Joe Colletti with his head crushed in and the harmless Dummy, strangled. What next in this wilderness of death set down in the middle of a spongey swampland on the coast of England? And what connection did one have with the other—or the strange fact of the monster reptile loosed in the yard? Well, he had been asking for adventure, and here it was.

CHAPTER VI

The Stranger

CALLING Chet Sanford from the car, Buck showed him the body of Dummy Harlow.

"It's like the affair down in the Islands two years ago," he told Sanford. "The native police there heard it was a ghost that was killing off a family—one at a time. There was nobody to suspect and the killer left no trail. I was stranded there myself, and I want to tell you it ain't only the little brown cops that fall for this terror stuff. But a ghost don't beat a man's brains out or choke another one to death."

SANFORD agreed with a nod, then roused himself and shook his head. His vivid imagination pictured the murderer walking out from a blank wall, dropping from the ceiling. Unconsciously, he glanced up. Buck ignored the suggestion.

"Stand right here a minute," he said. "Get hold of a chair there, and be ready to defend yourself if anything happens."

"Where are you going?" inquired Sanford narrowly.

"In there." Buck pointed to the bedroom. "Nobody came out of the house, so they must be in here—unless—"

His voice faded out as he turned and went into the bedroom. There he paused stiffly, listening. He could hear the rustling of the hay in the gorilla's cage and the soft padding of the beast's feet or paws. He found himself looking for the crack at the edge of the barred door. There was the eye again, watching him.

Ryder sneered, feeling a strong resentment toward this brute who seemed always spying, as if with some uncanny animal sense it knew the problem that was puzzling him. Then as he turned his head he let his eyes swing to the window near the head of Colletti's bed. And here Buck Ryder came alive instantly.

It was open. The lower sash was raised. And Buck remembered positively that when he was last in the room that window had been closed. With silent step he quickly reached

the sill and shot a quick look out to the ground. It was only a few feet below. Behind the house there the high iron fence was fifteen feet away. The ground was bare.

Buck studied the earth with eyes that bored every inch. But there was not a single sign of footprint, not a mark of any kind to indicate that a man had jumped or let himself down from that window.

Fingerprints! The idea came to him, but he was not a detective. He had no equipment to take marks from the window or the sill. A curse broke from between his bared teeth. He was completely baffled. He had faced the hatchet men in the shaded alleys of Shanghai; had fought the brown men, the flesh eaters, in Dutch Guiana, and carved his way out of a greaser pack in the hills of Western Mexico, yet he felt the foolish urge to turn and back away. Retreat. Get away from the place. He was afraid.

HE told Sanford how he felt. At first Chet thought he meant fear for his own personal safety; a fear of the killer who might at any moment now step out in front of them to take another toll.

"No," corrected Buck Ryder. "It isn't that. But I've got a royal purple hatred of bungling one of these things. I'd hate to be as near as this to a killer and let him get away into the clear."

"Well, we can't do a thing this way," argued Sanford, eager himself to see the last of the isolated animal farm. "Let's drive across the marsh and get help."

"You go," said Buck. "Take Diana and Alice. I'll stay here."

They were still talking as they reached the yard in front and Ryder turned his head toward the gate. The machine stood there. He could see the girls watching them. The snarl of one of the smaller cats in a cage somewhere on their right made Sanford jump. Then, though there had been no sound of a motor, no warning of any kind, they both heard some one hammering on the sheet iron gate. A voice from the other side, out there on the marsh, indistinctly shouting.

THE girls heard it, too, and had climbed out of the car before the two men reached it. Buck Ryder's face was set in a square hard block that did not wholly conceal some of the thoughts that rose up in his brain.

"Hey!" The shout came louder from outside.

"What do you want?" called Buck.

There was a slight hesitation from the knocker, then—"I'm lookin' for a skunk. Ain't this the animal farm?"

Ryder lifted the pin and rolled the door back. A thick-set, heavy man with steady blue eyes, stood in the opening. After a swift glance at the others, his eyes snapped back to Buck's face and narrowed sharply. There was something, some indescribable fleeting clash in the eyes of the two men.

Then the stranger moved toward Ryder. Behind him, through the open gate, Buck could see the silent, gray marshes, and far away at the end of the narrow private road, there was the lonely meadow crossroad that led up to Benfleet on the way to London.

"You ain't Colletti," said the man, adding, "That's a cinch."

"No," admitted Buck slowly. "Colletti's dead. He—"

"What?" exclaimed the other. "That's bad! Who are you anyway? You're Yanks, ain't you?"

Buck was not sure he had guessed right about the fellow, and he held himself ready for any tricky play when he answered, nodding.

"You're American too," answered

Ryder. "What did you want Colletti for?"

Quicker than you could bat an eye there was a heavy automatic in the stranger's hand, and its muzzle was pointed rigidly at Buck Ryder's belt. The move had been entirely unexpected, swifter than a breath of wind. The gun had been whipped from a shoulder holster.

"Back away," commanded the man. "You, too," he flipped his left hand toward Sanford. "Over there, and you two dames. Outa the car and stand together, the four of you. No queer moves now, or you'll never see the Statue of Liberty again."

Keeping his eyes on the two men, Ryder especially, he sidled to the gate and closed it, shutting out the only escape any one would have from the animal farm; shutting the Sanford party inside the high wall.

CHAPTER VII

A Wanted Man

BUCK RYDER stood alert. Under his breath he muttered a warning to Chet and the two girls to keep cool. He couldn't figure the man out and he kept his eyes on him now as the fellow walked toward them.

The gun never wavered and Buck could see that the man held it like one accustomed to the feel of a weapon in his fist. Still he was not the gunman killer type. Here was something—

"Turn around," ordered the gun holder, "and keep those hands up high. Not so close together, you two guys."

Buck moved slowly. As he turned, watching for the slightest possible chance for a break, for an opportunity to let drive with one of those fists, he spoke.

"You're just signing your death warrant, you mug," he assured the gunner. "When you start messing around me you're lighting a short fuse."

The stranger halted, shoving Sanford away from him and from Ryder.

"The hell you say," he growled. "What are you giving me?" His tone was challenging. "I'm the *Law*." Drawing back from Ryder, he frowned darkly and stared hard into Buck's face. "Say—Ain't you the guy from Vimy Ridge?"

BUCK RYDER'S eyebrows raised and his bright teeth flashed as he leaned toward the fellow. Their eyes were deadlocked in a battle of memories. Then he smiled.

"You were the bird with the rolling kitchen that was lost," he almost shouted. "Soup!"

"You're damn right," laughed the gent with the gun. "What are you an' these people doin' here?"

Buck Ryder told him and introduced the others.

"Brodie's the name," the newcomer offered. "Jees, yuh know I always thought that shell got you, Ryder." His hand pulled a suspender strap from the arm hole of his vest and Buck saw a shield.

The girls, tensed to this moment, sighed with relief. Buck still rankling under the embarrassment he had suffered, grunted a reply and quickly demanded an explanation.

"What's it all about?" he asked.

Brodie lowered his voice. His roving eyes had caught sight of the mutilated snake across the yard and he smothered an oath.

"For the love o'—the lower regions!" he gasped. "Was that thing alive?"

Buck nodded and told him what had happened. Then he added the story of how they had come to the place and found the owner dead, ending with an account of how the

Dummy was found but a few minutes ago.

"Is there a bird here by the name of—," Brodie glanced around him cautiously and whispered, "Piavsiok; P-i-a-v-s-i-o-k? A powerful guy with a pan that'd scare the kids?"

"If there is," replied Ryder thoughtfully, "we haven't seen him yet. There was only Colletti and the Dummy as far as we know. Did you know anybody else, Chet?"

Sanford shook his head. "Colletti," he stated, "has had different men working for him from time to time. But I never heard—say who was this —whatever you call him? Wasn't he a—?"

"Years ago," cut in Brodie, "he was a wrestler back in the West. California. A tough man, yeh."

"I remember now," said Buck slowly as he reflected. "They called him Ivan the Ox. Is that the guy you're after, Brodie?"

"None other," said Brodie.

"And for what?" demanded Ryder drawing the other out.

FOR murder," came the answer with a cold calmness as Brodie turned to look at the two girls who had gasped at his announcement. He drew a well-thumbed folded paper from his pocket and handed it to Ryder. Buck held it and read the reward notice, studied the picture of Ivan Piavsiok, the Ox, one-time heavyweight wrestler, later employed as an axe man with a lumber crew in Oregon.

"Wanted for murder," said Buck Ryder. "Have you been trailing him for two years on this and all the way across the ocean?"

"Yeh," replied Brodie. "Two years and more than ten thousand miles, but something tells me I'm—"

"But why come here?" argued Buck curiously. "What's the lead that brings you here?"

The two girls and Sanford drew nearer now and were listening with suppressed excitement as Brodie divulged his reason.

"Well," he confessed. "I got a hot tip in Baltimore, from an inside source, that this Colletti was seen in Liverpool two months ago in the company of Piavsiok. It can't be wrong. My party described this Ox in detail without knowin' who he was. And now here's Colletti knocked off. Say," Brodie took a quick breath and fixed Buck Ryder with his sharp blue eyes, "what are you makin' of this?"

BUCK, who had suddenly lowered his eyes and was staring at the ground, raised his head and looked toward the house where the owner of the animal farm had lived as late as last evening.

"I was just wondering," he confided grimly, "if—Colletti knew about the Ox; if he was really seen with him and was a friend of his; whether he was wise to the price on Piavsiok's head. And if the man who killed him—was—"

There was a sudden volcanic snort from what sounded like a lion somewhere among the cage rows. Diana Carleton uttered a frightened "Oh" and showed signs of returning nervousness. Buck quieted her and turned to Brodie, as a score or more of the big cats took up their snarling.

"You've got a gun, Brodie," said Buck, "and whoever killed these two men is still inside this fence. There's something mighty mysterious about the way he keeps out of sight, but with you here now we can give the place a good combing."

"I come all the way from Oregon," answered the American dick, "and I'm damned if I'm turning back now. Come on. Where do we start?"

"We'll go back to the big house," said Buck Ryder.

And even as he said it a pair of glittering eyes were boring into his back, into the backs of the all-unconscious group. A murderer's eyes, cruel and cunning, and laughing with the savage hatred of the killer who watches his hunters pass his hidden trail.

BUCK led the way to the house and Brodie followed him up the steps and into the big front office room. Ryder had stopped and turned to Brodie with a finger to his lips. His face was flushed under his weather tan and he motioned for Brodie to stop.

"Take it easy," he whispered, pointing to the floor and Brodie looked to see nothing but the bare worn rug. "It was lying right there when we left it—the Dummy's body —It's gone, Brodie!"

"You mean—?" Brodie paused significantly.

"Yes," nodded Ryder. "He was as dead as that old shoe there. Somebody carried him out of here." Buck was speaking slowly, in an undertone, almost awed by the realization that they were dealing with a very strange situation. The house was as still as an empty church as Buck went on.

"Nobody came out of that door, Brodie," he said. "It must be in the house. There's a trick to the place somewhere; some secret exit, or underground passage. We heard the phonograph, or gramaphone as they call it, and the Dummy was killed in here. Bing! Just like that. Quick. It was all over and neither time did we get so much as a slant at anybody."

Brodie rubbed the back of his neck and stared at Ryder, as if a cold hand had been placed at the top of his spine. He glanced toward the open door at the back of the room. Then his eyes swept around the walls. They weren't paneled. There could be no secret sliding doors in those walls. Perhaps in the next room. Buck read his thoughts.

The girls were standing in the doorway with Sanford, and Buck warned them against following him and Brodie. Together the two went into the bedroom. Brodie held his automatic in stiff fingers and began feeling along the walls carefully. The gorilla was padding around in the hay, and the soft swishing sound reached Brodie's ears.

He turned to Ryder and froze instantly, standing as still as a rock, looking toward the door that led into the passage before the cage.

"That's the gorilla," explained Ryder. "How would you like to sleep in that bed, Brodie?"

THE dick from the States made a sour face and bent to look under the bed. Buck felt himself drawn to the window again, and as he reached it, glancing out, he grabbed the sill and swung around on his companion.

"Brodie!" he called out. "By the living jingo! This beats hell. Look!"

In two jumps Brodie was beside him staring out of the window down to the ground.

"It's him," said Buck. "The Dummy."

Involuntarily both men, neither ashamed of their action, jumped erect and looked back over their shoulders. Ryder felt something positively uncanny about the place. One minute the dead man had lain on the floor in the office and now here he was sprawled awkwardly on his face on the ground. Thrown there, without a doubt.

But by whom? And where was the man or men who had tossed him out there and disappeared as completely as if the earth had opened up and swallowed them? The question was

in the minds of both men, but Brodie, feeling the grim mysterious atmosphere of the place for the first time, tried to throw it off with a gruff word.

"Baloney," he said. "What's upstairs in this house?"

Ryder did not answer at once. He had noticed something that struck him as strange. Something he had not observed before. It seemed that the room had been ransacked since he had examined it last. The dresser drawers had been pulled out and the mattress on the bed had been disturbed.

"Listen, Brodie," he said. "I've been over this house to the roof, but I just noticed here something that explains—that shows me why this killer didn't lam after croaking Colletti. He's after something that's here; looking for—the devil knows what. Maybe money."

"Did this guy have any dough?" inquired Brodie.

"Don't know," said Buck, "but I understand he had done pretty well in his theatrical bookings. And of course, his animal farm is one of the biggest in Europe. People come here for most anything that's needed."

BRODIE was moving slowly, softly, toward the door of the passageway. Buck watched him. Saw him stop and peer inside through the bars of the cage he knew was there. He saw Brodie's eyes widen, then narrow, and the dick drew back putting the gun behind him.

"Let's get out of here, Ryder," he said solemnly. "That thing gives me the creeps. Let's look around back of the house and make a tour of the buildings."

Together the two went into the office. Buck stopped the ex-soldier and laid a hand on his arm. "Listen," he said. "I just thought. Maybe there's a cellar."

"Buck!" It was three voices blended into one shout. Sanford and the two girls; then hurried, excited calls from the door and Sanford burst in with the women at his back.

"Look!" yelled Chet, dragging Buck to the doorway, as Alice Grannis burst into tears.

"Oh," she cried, "it's too awful. What a dreadful sight!"

BRODIE had crowded after Ryder and five pairs of eyes were centered down the narrow path between two rows of cages. Coming directly toward the house in which they stood was what appeared to be a man. As he passed cage after cage the raging beasts roared and snarled and hurled themselves viciously against the bars.

The thing came on, staring blankly, half naked, its mop of matted hair clutched in one talon hand; in the other a heavy club. It seemed to stagger as if the walking was a great effort. As it drew nearer, Ryder stepped out and stood before the house. The thing came weaving toward him like a specter. Where it had come from none of them knew. Brodie whistled softly between his teeth.

"He's naked," said Brodie, "from the waist."

Only now, as he got to within twenty-five feet of Ryder, did the creature appear to notice anyone. His staring eyes grew fierce and Buck saw the muscles of his arm bulge under the grip on the club.

"Drop that," shouted Buck Ryder, "put it down."

But the man did not seem to hear or care. On he came. Then Brodie leaped forward and swung up his automatic, leveling it on the hideous spectacle's heart.

"Don't shoot him," yelled Ryder, and, as if the word "shoot" had driven itself into the disordered brain, the man stopped and leaning

on the club, looked from one to another of his foes. His dilated eyes blinked and he rubbed a dirty hand across his face. For a long tense moment nobody moved. The men could hear a stifled sob, and Buck recognized Diana's voice.

The gun in Brodie's hand held his eye now, and Buck seeing his attention fixed, took a step toward him. He intended to be as gentle as possible with the fellow, but he wanted to get the club. The man looked insane, a wreck. With Ryder's first step the newcomer drew back unsteadily and swung the club, then tottered, lost his balance and fell to the ground. Leaping to the side of the creature, Buck kicked the club out of his hand and bent over. Then he waved to Brodie.

"He went out," shouted Buck, "like a light. See if you can get some water someplace, Chet."

THE man's eyes were closed and his mouth half open. His face was thin, but he had a strong neck, and his body suggested a once great physique. He had the kind of face that would have been deceiving in street clothes, but now he wore only ragged trousers and old black shoes. He had no shirt and no socks.

Buck straightened him out on the ground and pointed to his head. A raw fresh wound on the side of his head was clotted with blood, and on his neck were plainly visible the marks of strong fingers.

"Where did he come from?" said Buck, more to himself.

Half dazed by the confusion that had surrounded her since they had arrived at dawn Diana Carleton heard Buck's question and stuck her small gloved hand out. She pointed down through the narrow runway.

Ryder's lips smiled, but his eyes were like steel jacketed bullets. He was looking past her, past Alice Grannis, toward the house. The little group became as still as a framed picture; and into the stillness there came the soft, smothered sound as of someone tapping with a finger ring against glass.

CHAPTER VIII

The Killer's Claws

SPRINGING up, Buck Ryder ran like a streak for the house and dashed in through the door. It was pure recklessness, but he was desperate now, and he paused only for a quick look about the office. The swift, soft swish of something moving came to his ears. It was not in the room where he stood, and in another instant he had leaped into the bedroom where he swore as he found himself equally alone.

But the faint sharp sound of a click as if the lock of a door was snapped closed echoed in the room. Buck yanked open the clothes closet door for the seventh time. There was nothing there, nobody. Turning, he ran excitedly through the passage and jerked the door wide, as he felt the sudden rush of the big ape toward the front of the cage. The barest few inches at the end of the snake-like arm of the beast let him break clear into the hall, and he heard Brodie somewhere behind him.

"Get back there," shouted the western dick, and Buck could picture him in that passage.

Then, as Buck was climbing the stairs three steps at a time, the whole house rocked with the booming roar of a gun. Brodie had fired, had shot the gorilla, and an instant later the panting of Brodie was heard on the stairs.

"Whew!" breathed the thick-set officer rushing into the room where Buck Ryder was throwing a pile of furniture topsy-turvy. "I hadda fire

a shot into the floor to keep that big black thing away from me. What do you think?"

"Downstairs," puffed Ryder. "Come on."

A THOROUGH search of the walls and doors upstairs availed nothing. Buck led the way in a run back downstairs and looking around found a smooth door under the stairs. The cellar.

"Got a flash?" asked Brodie pressing his ear against the panel.

"No," answered Ryder. "Take a run outside and get one from Sanford. He's always got one in his car."

Brodie cursed, took a flying start with his gun ready and dove through the passage in front of the cage, followed by an angry gutteral growl from the animal. Buck stood motionless near the door.

In a flash Brodie came, breathing heavily, to run the gauntlet once more. Then, the two, primed for anything they might find, flung open the cellar door and jumped down into the dark with the flash stabbing the black hole like a white hot bar of molten metal.

They glared at each other over the flare of the light. Brodie bit off an oath, and the flashlight in his hand began to tremble a little. They had reached nowhere.

"Don't let it get you," argued Ryder. "Maybe that sound came from the other house. Here, throw your light up under the floor."

After a quick search for a possible trap door that they might have overlooked, they hurried, damp with sweat, upstairs and to the end of the hall where Ryder raised the window.

"Go ahead," suggested Brodie, and Ryder nodded, climbing out to drop to the ground below.

Brodie followed him. They examined the ground which was rather hard and surfaced with a mixture of gravel and cinders. Not a footprint was there to show them the way, but Ryder shrugged his shoulders and headed for the next building. There was a small shed between the two houses, and they looked through a window there, but found nothing.

Nor could they find so much as a mouse in the house where poor Dummy Harlow had lived and slept. This was where the feed bins and the kitchen were located.

"Up a tree," sneered Brodie. "Do you believe in ghosts, Buck?"

"Nonsense," answered Ryder, blinking in frank confusion. "There's nothing supernatural about the thing. It's just devilish, and the fiend has the edge on us."

They went from there to the garage where they searched and saw two cars, a sedan and a special small truck body with a portable cage. Colletti used this for transportation of animals.

The floor was solid cement. It was like following a clue that suddenly went up in smoke before your eyes and evaporated. Buck recalled the weird creature they had left in Sanford's charge.

"Maybe he's conscious," he suggested, "and can shed some light on this queer place. Colletti, you know, was a theatre man originally, and he knew all the tricks of camouflage."

Brodie was wiping beads of sweat from his face. "Let's go. Anything to get out of this joint."

HE said his name was Wilbur Beckett and that he had been a circus animal man for years. He sat on the ground with a puzzled look in his face as Ryder and Brodie joined Chet Sanford. The two girls hovered near and Chet had been wiping the man's face with a handkerchief which bore embroidered initials—A. G.

"How did you get here?" asked

Buck quickly. "Do you work for Colletti?"

"Hi only came larst night," said Beckett. "Colletti fetched me hout from town. Where's 'e hat?"

Buck told the wretched cockney what had happened and then Beckett told his listeners how he had come to the animal farm in the night and was going to take charge of the place while Colletti went on a trip. The Dummy was all right, only he couldn't talk; had no tongue. Beckett hadn't seen the Dummy, but Colletti had told him about him.

"Hi said he'd as leaf sleep down there," said the battered fellow turning with effort and pointing to the far end of the fenced farm. "Been sleepin' wit' animals h..l me life. So the boss shows me where hi can make a bunk for muhself in the larst shanty down there."

BECKETT turned in, so he said, and lay smoking on his cot when he remembered his bag which had been left in the car. He got up and walked through the dark to the house and swung to the left toward the garage. He was going to get it without disturbing the boss. But as he passed near an opened window, he heard voices.

"Hi knew it warn't the Dummy," said Beckett, "'cause Colletti told me about 'im.

"But hi was sartin there wore supposed to be only the three of us in 'ere wit' the creatures. And hi stopped as hi 'eard Joe's voice.

"'Aw, shut up,' he says to the other cove. 'Don't forget about the five grand. Hi could turn yuh in an' get meself a good piece of dough. You've got a nerve after hall hive been a doin' for you.'"

The other "cove," according to Beckett, growled something under his breath.

"What did Colletti call him?" asked Buck Ryder hoping for a clue to the man's identity.

"Hi couldn't 'ear," said Beckett, "but hi 'eard 'im tell Joe 'e'd croak 'im if 'e thought 'e was goin' to cross 'im. Hit sounded balmy to me, but this is a balmy world. Hi thought maybe 'e was just some cove visitin' Joe, and they were a arguin' about private business.

"So hi went into the garage an' got me bag. When hi come by again the 'ouse was that quiet until hi got 'arf way down the lane there. Then hi 'eard a door knob squeak an' hi looked around. But hi didn't see a bloomin' soul."

RYDER nodded his head thoughtfully.

"And then—" he urged.

"Hi didn't think nothink more about it," said Beckett, and he went on to explain that he had rolled into his cot and went off to sleep to wake up feeling somebody in his tiny room. He sat up in bed, and the next moment he felt iron hands around his throat. It was too dark to see who his assailant was, too quick, too sudden. He was fighting like an animal for his life against a fellow who handled him like a man would handle a wolf pup.

"'E were as strong as a bull," declared the victim, "and 'e tossed me around like a toy. Hi felt meself gettin' weaker. Couldn't hurt 'im, the dirty blighter, and then 'e bashed me 'ead against the wall, 'r floor 'r someplace an' hi guess 'e thought hi was dead."

Beckett thought he was dead, too. He must have lain unconscious for hours until the spark of life flared up and roused him. It was daylight.

"Show us this place, said Ryder. "Where is it? Maybe we can find something that will help."

"Oh, the poor man," moaned Diana Carleton, as Ryder and Brodie

helped Beckett to his feet and steadied him.

"I'd be willin' to bet right now," offered Brodie, "that the guy who's behind this thing is the Ox."

"You don't know anything about the house then?" said Ryder to Beckett. "About any secret room or hidden connection with a compartment?"

"No," admitted the cockney ex-circus man, "and hi don't want to know neither. Hi 'm gettink away from 'ere as soon as hi can travel."

"All right," agreed Buck, "but first show us where this thing got hold of you last night. Alice," he turned to the girls, "suppose you and Diana sit there on the steps for a minute. You're not afraid, are you? We won't be out of sight."

"No, of course not," answered Alice Grannis, masking her anxiety with a forced smile. "But don't be long. I'm about fagged out."

"Only a couple of minutes," assured Buck, as the girls went to sit on the steps, and the four men started down the narrow aisle between the cages.

THE animals were silent now as Wilbur Beckett led the way, his feet rather unsteady, his balance still poor. Alice and Diana, their faces showing the effects of the past few strenuous hours, kept their eyes on the backs of the men. Diana could feel the girl beside her slowly sagging. She glanced at Alice, and put her hand on the dramatic star's shoulder.

"When they come back," she said, "we'll make them get away from here."

"My head is going around in circles," murmured Alice, putting her hand to her brow. "I feel as if—"

"Wait a second," begged Diana jumping to her feet, "I'll get you a glass of water. Bite your tongue a second." Then she was gone, rushing into Colletti's office to the basin that stood in a corner.

"Diana," said Alice weakly, "don't—"

But it was too late. The girl was in there, and Alice heard the water running.

RINSING out a glass with feverish haste, Diana Carleton turned her head at a sound and glanced toward the door of the bedroom. Her eyes grew suddenly wild with horror. The half-filled glass in her fingers fell with a crash into the basin, splintering in a thousand pieces. And with it she screamed, felt her body grow ice cold and tried to turn and run for the front door. Two steps she took, two dragging, leaden steps, and then the creature was on her. She felt the great arms envelope her and she swooned as outside, from the steps of the house Alice Grannis rushed screaming toward the men.

Buck Ryder was half way to the house before she started. He had spun around with the first outcry from Diana and was past Alice now, going like lightning. In a single mighty jump he flew clear through the open door.

What Happens to Diana? Is Buck Ryder in Time to Save Her? Does Brodie Find the Ox? What Part Does the Ox Play in the Sinister Happenings at the Animal Farm? For the Answer to These and Other Exciting Questions Read the Thrilling Conclusion of "The Prowling Creature" in Next Month's THRILLING ADVENTURES.

Bandits *in* Ermine



A Story of the Lure of the Precious Furs—and Grim Vengeance in the Manchurian Wilderness

By ARTHUR J. BURKS

Author of "The Crimson Blight," "Bare Fists," etc.

GEORGE GRIDER sighed with relief and sprawled out a bit further, extending his legs toward the roaring fire. Over to his right Carp Salem and Griff Ansel were playing double solitaire The three partners knew that their residence represented at this moment perhaps the only comfortable place within a hundred miles of Kirin.

When Grider shivered it wasn't because of the blizzard which whined and moaned under the eaves outside, but because he had imagination and could fancy himself right out in it.

The sigh of relief was because he knew he didn't have to, really. No, with Manchuria freezing and starving, everybody came to him—and to his partners. Money was scarce in mid-winter and travel all but impossible. The partners had money and humble folk came to them from many miles distant to receive of their store.

"It's like shooting fish in a barrel, isn't it?" said Grider, suddenly. "Here we sit, lords of a little realm of our own, and the things we de-

sire the most are brought to our door. We examine and take, and pay for those things—as little as we can."

Carp Salem and Griff Ansel shoved their cards together and ended their play. They grinned at Grider, and the eyes of all three lifted to the far walls of the huge room. Skins—skins—skins—the walls were loaded with them. There were sable and crossed fox, otter and ermine—but mostly ermine. The partners grinned as their eyes played over their wealth.

"What do you suppose the lot would bring on Seventh Avenue and Thirtieth Street, George?" asked Ansel.

GRIDER merely whistled. They'd figured it out too often for him to bother about commenting. They could become wealthy.

And they had planned out everything. There could be no hitches, and the day would surely come when they would enter New York City with their mighty cargoes of furs. The nine thousand miles between them and New York mattered little.

"Just think of all the beauty," said Grider softly. "Those ermines there, for example. Can't you just see them as gorgeous backgrounds for beautiful women? Blondes—brunettes—red-heads. Just looking at them, I can hear the finest music in the world. There is the atmosphere of the theatre. Of course, I realize the lives which have vanished from the world to provide these furs, but aside from his fur, what is an ermine good for? His life is valuable only to himself—except when he's dead."

"You were something—well, something rather important in the United States, weren't you, Grider?" said Ansel diffidently.

Ansel and Salem looked at each other a bit fearfully. They had never understood this big athletic George Grider very well; but they had always felt uncomfortable when he turned his steel-gray eyes upon them. They were as chill—when he was angry—as the blizzard which now blew across the face of Manchuria from arctic Siberia. With them he was seldom angry, but he had his way, especially if he were right.

Now he grinned, and that chilliness was in his eyes again.

"It is enough for you to know, my friends," he said softly, "that I am skilled in the thing for which you made me a partner in this strange venture: I am one of the best rifle shots in the world. I've shown you my medal of Distinguished Marksman to prove it. And I have proved it with any firearm you gave me."

"I've often thought," said Carp Salem, his black eyes narrowed broodingly, "what an efficient murderer you would make!"

"Meaning," said Grider with a grin, "that you two, knowing as little about me as you do after all, have got together and asked questions about me which neither of you could answer. You both realize that as long as I am armed you are more or less helpless in my hands? If I choose, let us say, to set out with all the furs on a sledge, en route to the Siberian Border, you would be compelled to take your loss and say nothing? Because I could drop you the moment you got on my trail?"

SALEM and Ansel exchanged glances again. They shifted uncomfortably.

"There isn't much law in this wilderness of snow," said Ansel dubiously. "A dead man would not be found for months."

Grider's cheek bones showed whitely through his bronzed skin for

a moment as he looked at Ansel and Salem. His eyes played over them, unreadable. The two knew how well those eyes could see.

BUT they met his gaze without flinching. They were sincere in their doubts. Grider rose to his full six feet of slim grace and faced his partners. He thrust out both hands and after a moment the partners took them.

"Griff—Carp," he said, his voice shaking a little, "I understand how you feel. You two have spent ten years in this God forgotten land, trying to make a stake. You've been double-crossed so many times by people you trusted that you doubt every one you meet.

"After all, what *do* you know of me? Nothing. Less than nothing. I was down and out when you found me in Mukden, and we got to talking. You finally, by chance, I assume, asked me what I could do. I told you I could hit anything I could see, with any firearm you could produce. After a while I proved it to you. To you that was all; I was an unknown quantity.

"But I'm never forgetting one thing, my friends, partners: that but for you—well, I don't know exactly what would have become of George Grider, and then I didn't much care. I had even talked over the rewards of banditry with a skulking *hung hu tze,* or Red Beard, in Mukden. I would have turned weapons against human beings for the chance to live.

"You saved me from that—aw, hell, I'm getting mushy, but you see how I feel? I hope you're satisfied."

They laughed it off, those three partners who had been snowed in for a whole month and yet had scarcely once lost patience with one another. They were pals. A real affection existed among the whites in that little oasis in the noisy white wilderness.

George Grider, the tall blond—Carp Salem, the tow-headed husky—Griff Ansel, the black-haired man who seldom spoke. Three dangerous customers in a fight, one knew at once.

"I wonder why Sung Liao doesn't get back from Mukden?" said Salem impatiently. "I have a feeling something has happened, something that may affect our arrangements. I've felt nervous all day."

The blizzard roared even louder outside. It whistled about the corners of the stone building. It rattled under the eaves and murmured at the door. It was like a great awesome beast, trying to get in.

A Chinese boy of North China, came silently in from the kitchen to build up the fire. His dark yellow face was impassive. Broad of shoulders, he was the fighting Chinese. The partners knew he had once belonged to the *hung hu tze,* and had been exiled because he balked at wholesale murder.

NOW he was a marvelous servant. The partners had won his absolute loyalty. He would fight to the death for them if they needed him at any time. He had quite calmly told them that just once. It hadn't been necessary to repeat it. His name was a strange one, Ng Loong.

Ng Loong lifted his head in an attitude of listening, in the very act of throwing a fresh stick of wood on the fire.

"Somebody come," he said.

The partners stiffened.

Their eyes sought the places where they kept their weapons. This was bandit country. Bandits had never bothered them before, because the fame of George Grider as a marks-

man had traveled through all Manchuria.

"Is it friend or enemy, Loong?" queried Grider.

"Sung Liao, my thinking," said Ng Loong imperturbably.

The door rattled immediately thereafter. Ng Loong looked a question at his three masters. Grider nodded his head toward the door. Ng Loong swung it open.

Great lacy streamers of blizzard-spun snow came seething in, as though it were the astral body of the man who came in with it. Great gusty panting, that rasped like a file, came from the newcomer. He staggered and would have fallen but for Ng Loong.

"Sung Liao," said Ansel, "and he's been traveling at top speed. Something's up to make him kill himself to get to us."

SUNG LIAO sprawled on the fur rug before the fire. Ng Loong hurried to get snow to rub into his ears, his cheeks, his frost-bitten nose. And after he had rested a little, Grider held a drink of rice wine to his black lips. Sung Liao drank, gasped, and began to speak in the pidgin, which the partners turned into passable English as they listened.

"The Japanese occupy Mukden," he said. "Everywhere they have slain honest Chinese who do nothing against them. They hold Mukden with bullet and bayonet, with chattering guns and with big guns. The Arsenal is in their hands. Manchuria of the Three Eastern Provinces has become a Japanese land."

"What does that mean to us, Sung Liao?" asked Grider, his voice hoarse. "There is more to it than that, else you wouldn't have hurried so to bring back the news. What does it matter to us what the Japanese do? To we three foreigners, I mean? We know what it means to *you.*"

Sung Liao gasped, breathing stertorously as though fighting for strength to continue.

"Do you not see? With occupation by the Japanese, who are mainly interested just now in Mukden and the Peking-Mukden railroad, Chinese government of Manchuria falls. That means but one thing to Chinese—it means that bandits will seize the reins, as they always do in times of stress. Under cover of claiming to revolt against Japanese aggression they loot their own kind instead. They murder and steal, loot and rape and destroy."

"I still don't see," went on Grider. "If they've left us alone up to now, why should they bother us at all?"

"You forget that your store of skins in this house is but a small part of your purchases of skins. Within fifty miles in all directions from this house there are scores of sellers who, among them, hold in their own possession four times what you have here. They know that the *hung hu tze* have coveted your furs. They know that if they deliver them now, they will be punished by the *hung hu tze* later under a pretext that they've betrayed their own people. The Red Beards believe themselves the law.

"So the people who have not yet delivered will keep their furs and use them to barter with the Red Beards, if need be, for their lives. Those who have already sold to you and delivered will hide themselves lest the Red Beards find them."

THE partners looked at one another. If this were true their wealth, in one stroke, was reduced to about a fifth of what they had expected, and all because of a freak of fate. What should they do? While trying to think of something

Grider asked a question, the first one that popped into his head.

"Do you know for a fact that the Red Beards covet our furs?"

"I have heard whispers of desperate schemes to get them."

No more was said at the moment. Ng Loong finally took Sung Liao away and put him to bed. The North Chinese would be himself by tomorrow. The big lads were hard to kill.

Grider looked at his partners.

"If we move quickly," he said, "we realize far more on our furs."

"Yes?" said Ansel. "How so?"

"We planned on paying the regular rate for our furs to the Chinese government before taking them across the Border into Siberia, for transport to Vladivostok for further transport home, didn't we?"

"Y-e-e-s," said Ansel, wondering what was coming.

"Do you feel we owe the Japanese who will loot the Chinese blind, anything of loyalty? Should we pay the Japanese the usual rate? There is no Chinese government at the moment. My idea is that we get our furs together the fastest way we know how, and make for the Border at once, before Russia takes a hand in the show and masses so many troops at the Border we won't be able to make it."

SALEM and Ansel broke into quick smiles. They nodded instantly when they comprehended his meaning.

"I think I can persuade all our erstwhile prospective sellers that they can safely sell to us," said Grider, "since we'll move the furs so fast nobody will be able to check up on us. Suppose you stay here while I make a wide sweep around and get the furs moving this way? I understand the North Chinese better than you do, never mind why. Just say I've lived longer among them, which is true enough. And they respect me more for my marksmanship."

"It seems sort of rotten for you to go out alone," said Salem. "We're partners, you know."

"Yes, and it needs two here to guard the furs. Look at those sweet cross foxes. Would you keep a hundred or so American debutantes from wearing them just because you carelessly allowed them to fall into the hands of the *hung hu tze?* My job isn't nearly as dangerous, it'll just be hell-awful cold."

The two finally agreed.

"I kept thinking what it would be like to be out in the blizzard," said Grider ruefully. "I guess I had a hunch before Liao got here that I'd have to get my nose cold. Oh, well, if I'm lucky I'll be back in three days."

NG LOONG prepared his knapsack, which was as light as he could possibly make it and still hold his supplies. Within half an hour George Grider, his ears covered by ear-muffs, his hands encased in fur-lined gloves, his feet amply protected by mukluks, was setting his feet into the straps of his skis.

"I'll keep the wind at my back to keep from freezing my lungs," he said. "And I'll travel top speed. Thank the Lord for Marathon running ability. Besides, it'll keep me warm—if possible."

They grinned at him, trying not to show how fearful they were for his safety. He turned his skis, grasped his ski-pole, made sure his automatic was in a pocket over his heart, keeping its mechanism warm against his body, and was off into the storm.

Almost instantly it swallowed him, and Salem and Ansel shivered for five minutes before the roaring fireplace when they returned at last to

their chairs. Twenty minutes motionless beyond that closed door meant death by freezing.

They sat down to their double solitaire. They must pass the time as best they could until the furs began coming in. Somehow they knew Grider would start them coming. They heaved their first real sigh of relief when, near morning, the first load came.

It proved that Grider had reached the first seller and persuaded him. Ansel paid the money over and the frightened Chinese seller went back into the storm.

TEN more loads came in between darkness and midnight the next night. After midnight they came steadily—until the room of the furs was packed so tightly with them that there was little room for the two partners to get around in. Of course, all were not ermine and crossed fox. They couldn't expect such fabulous luck.

George Grider was producing the goods.

In between arrivals and departures the partners played solitaire to keep from showing a nervousness that grew upon them as the moment approached when Grider would return and the dash for the Border would begin.

Ng Loong and Sung Liao were making arrangements, scarcely stopping to sleep. There would be many sledges on hand, three hours before Grider was due to arrive, and there would be speedy little Mongolian ponies to pull them. Grider would be half dead from exhaustion when he returned.

There was a sledge to be loaded down with huge furs under which he would rest and catch up on sleep. Ng Loong and Sung Liao overlooked nothing. They needed few orders from Carp Salem and Griff Ansel.

But three hours before Grider returned disaster descended. Salem and Ansel sat on, however, facing each other across the table, with the cards between them. But now they just stared, and sat, and did not move at all.

When George Grider arrived, on time almost to the dot, the door of the house was open. The fire still burned in the fireplace. Salem and Ansel still sat at their table, with the cards between them—such cards as had not been scattered by the flurries of wind which had spread fine snow in a tiny drift from the door.

George Grider knew tragedy when he saw it. His jaw jutted forth above clenched teeth as he entered, weariness all but forgotten, and closed the door behind him. He crossed to the fire and threw fresh wood upon it. It was important that he live. The fire came first. Then he stepped to his partners, who had not moved.

"Hey, Ansel, Salem!" he said, but even as he spoke, or even before, he knew they would not answer.

HIS two partners were dead and already stiffening with the coldness of the blizzard and the coldness of death. There was a bullet hole in Ansel's forehead and one in Salem's.

Grider looked around him, wondering who had done this. Involuntarily his eyes lifted to the store of furs. He knew every fur the partners owned, even those which had come in in his absence, for these he had sorted before they had started through the storm to Ansel and Salem.

The finest crossed foxes and ermines were gone!

Grider shouted for Ng Loong, and from the kitchen a moaning voice answered him.

Grider hurried out. Ng Loong was

sprawled on the floor of his kitchen, and a pool of blood was congealing about him. He had been shot in the stomach. But his lips parted in a half-smile as he recognized George Grider.

"I try best to live to tell you what happen," he said simply. "I shall tell you. Then I shall die!"

GRIDER neither denied nor affirmed. He knew the Chinese boy told the truth.

"Where's Sung Liao?" he demanded.

"Gone!"

"Gone where?"

"Gone with the *hung hu tze* to Siberia with the choicest furs!"

"Begin at the beginning," said Grider harshly, "if you have the strength."

"I make the strength," said the dying man. "It was only two hours ago that they came, and among them there must have been one who was clever, for they had found a way to hide themselves from the fury of Master Grider."

Grider bent eagerly over Ng Loong.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"They knew they could not escape you if they merely took the furs and fled, so they needed concealment. But they couldn't hide and get money for the furs in Siberia at the same time. So they made a plan. That plan made it possible for them to sneak up on us here, too."

"Quickly, tell me," interrupted Grider.

"I heard them discussing it when they thought me dead," said Ng Loong, now little above a whisper. "There were twelve of them. They were a picked bunch. They were of the *hung hu tze,* but they planned to cheat their own brethren out of sharing the spoils. Not all the Red Beards knew of what was to happen here tonight. Only these twelve—from what I heard."

"Yes," said Grider impatiently, afraid Ng Loong would die before he had finished. "Tell me the rest."

"They did everything so that they could move and be hidden, too. Every man was dressed in white from heels to crown. Even their skis were white as the whitest snow. They wore big fur garments which were very loose upon them, and into these they thrust all the furs they could carry. From their talk they believed that nobody could see them in the storm, or even if the storm cleared, especially at night. They were almost as sure they could travel without detection in the daytime."

"I see," muttered Grider, "somebody who knows a lot about rifle shooting tipped them off to that. At a distance it would be almost impossible to pot one of those men in white because he would blend so closely with the snow, especially if he stood still, that he would be all blurred. What else did the leader of the outfit say by way of orders?"

"The leader," said Ng Loong, whose very seconds now were few, "was Sung Liao!"

"Impossible!" said Grider.

"Yes," replied Ng Loong, "for after the two masters were killed, Sung Liao spoke to the *hung hu tze* in their own dialect, telling them that he knew all your plans for disposing of the furs across the Border and that for a share in them he would go along and show them."

"Were my partners killed at once?" asked Grider grimly.

NG LOONG'S eyes clouded with something besides death for a moment.

"Not at once," he gasped. "They

were covered by the weapons of the men in white as they sat at table playing cards. It was useless to move. Their weapons were too far away. The *hung hu tze* took all by surprise, even I, who did not hear them. I heard the two masters say, just before the two shots which killed them: 'So Grider has double-crossed us, after all!' "

Grider started. So Salem and Ansel had gone to death believing that he had sold them out and would profit in this theft. They couldn't know, unless the dead knew things, that the Red Beards had fled to escape Grider himself—who was almost a legend as a superhuman marksman.

Grider returned to the sitting room and looked down at the two silent men who faced each other across the table. His eyes were horrible to look into. His jaws were ridged with muscle.

"I didn't do it, partners," he said. "They made you think it, besides leaving you like this! Well, I promise you they'll pay!"

A STRANGLED cry from the kitchen and he went back to Ng Loong. He hadn't tried to lift Ng Loong to a bed. Ng Loong had stopped him at his first attempt.

"Do not try," he had said, "or my stomach will fall out."

Now the yellow boy's face was beaded with agony sweat.

"I forgot—something—might be important," he gasped.

"Yes?"

"It is sign by which—knew—Sung Liao leader—*hung hu tze*."

"Yes?" said Grider again, visioning at the same time what he would do now to Sung Liao if he could grasp him with his hands.

"As a sign of great honor to the bandit-killers," went on Ng Loong, "Sang Liao gave to each man an ermine fur as an ornament for his hat. They were pleased with Sung Liao for that. He showed them how to fasten the ermine, so that the tails hung down bravely behind."

Grider's brow was thoughtfully furrowed, wondering what could have been the true meaning of Sung Liao's behavior.

"And Sung Liao," he said to Ng Loong, "did he also fasten an ermine to his hat?"

"No. But his men insisted that he, too, dress all in white. He had a suit of white furs in readiness."

Grider was now trembling with excitement.

He bent lower over Ng Loong.

"Ng Loong, my friend, my loyal servant," he said, "we must bid each other good-by. But there is one thing you must know before you leave me. Sun Liao, who was your friend, did not betray his masters. He is not in league with the Red Beards. He has delivered them into my hands!"

"If it is true, then am I pleased, my master," whispered Ng Loong. "They headed directly north, by the sound. I die in peace."

Gently Grider, pillowing Ng Loong's head in his last moments, lowered the dead man's head to the floor.

NG LOONG, a smile on his face, had died content. Grider was now all excitement. He raced into the room where the two partners kept silent vigil over a scattered game of double solitaire.

"I didn't double-cross you!" he repeated. "Couldn't you have known that? But I understand. You saw wealth in your hands, and when the future seemed brightest, it was taken from you again. You thought instantly of me, of whom you knew so little. You saw those white clothes —why couldn't you understand they

were worn to guard the wearers against me?

"But I can't blame you for not realizing. It must have been devastatingly sudden. But I'll pay them. They killed the two best in the world—and gave them not a chance for their lives. And they sent you out, Carp—Griff, believing me responsible for your death, and for that they shall pay to the uttermost."

FROM a wooden gun-box of his own manufacture George Grider took forth a high-powered rifle which his long-fingered hands caressed as though it had been a beloved child.

"And you shall procure my revenge," he said softly.

His eyes were glowing.

The rifle was equipped with a silencer and telescopic sights. The silencer—well, there were times when one slew foxes and ermine and did not wish others to know. And telescopic sights made it possible to slay at distances so great that the victim never heard the rifle whose bullet destroyed him, because the bullet traveled faster than sound. This was of value against men—and against men he intended to use it.

He looked around before leaving. He had traveled at top speed for many hours, but he had forgotten the fatigue of those hours. A fire burned within him. Salem and Ansel were dead, and they had saved his life. Ng Loong was dead, and he had been faithful and true. Sung Liao was alive because of quick wits—but in the end, when he had shown his captors—for that's what they really were—all he knew, he would be left in the snow, dead.

He might still save Sung Liao. He grinned grimly as he realized that if he were able to save Liao, it would be because Liao himself had made it possible.

He set out into the waste on the trail of the killers. Behind him a fire burned cheerfully in the house of the dead. Grider had made them a silent promise that he would return to them—and soon.

He carried his rifle in his furs to keep it warm, fearful that the mechanism would be impaired by frozen oil. His eyes stared into the north, seeking a hint. He must travel fast. He must depend upon Sung Liao to cut down the speed of the *hung hu tze*. Sung Liao must be careful, though, for if he were suspected he would die.

"I wonder," thought Grider, "who, if anybody, told the *hung hu tze* they must not look back if they suspected I was close behind them? Their faces would show them to me as a mark if they turned. Trust Sung Liao; he probably thought of that. If he did, it must have put him all the more into their good graces."

The further he went—and his house was now out of sight behind him—the more he appreciated the cleverness of Sung Liao. Or had it been chance on Sung Liao's part? Grider didn't think so. The scheme fitted together too well.

THE *hung hu tze* wouldn't stop tonight, he was fairly sure of that. They wouldn't dare risk a fire, knowing he wouldn't be far behind, and without a fire they would freeze—unless they kept traveling. So they would undoubtedly keep traveling. Grider could depend upon Sung Liao—if he had read his actions aright and Sung Liao were not, after all, in cahoots with the *hung hu tze*—to lead the killers in a straight line. Ng Loong had said north.

"I won't be far behind them," mut-

tered Grider, "when morning comes. I don't think anybody but Sung Liao will have a rifle that can shoot accurately as far as mine. I must keep well behind them."

But when he finally caught a blurred white movement, far ahead there, he decided to follow to the right rear of his quarry, hoping they would look for pursuit from directly behind. Then he speeded up. He studied the dozen men. They were like snowmen, walking.

"I might drop one of them," thought Grider, "but by the time I squeezed the trigger on him my eyes would be a white blur and I'd miss the others. Good for Sung Liao!"

Now the *hung hu tze* were climbing up a short incline there ahead. They could be seen plainly with both eyes; but how about it, peering at them through rifle sights, with one eye closed, the other squinted? Good for Sung Liao, indeed!

Grider flung himself down prone and moved rapidly. He had to get into firing position, slip his hand out of his glove, and do all he could with the enemy before his hand became so stiff with cold he had to stop.

"I should be able to down three of them," he muttered.

HE hugged the cold stock against his cheek. His belly lay flat on the crusted snow. He breathed easily while he took up the slack in the trigger. Then he held his breath for a split second while his forefinger pulled the trigger back, his whole right hand squeezing the stock to get equal, uniform pressure on that trigger which wouldn't disarrange his deadly aim. A slight noise came from the weapon.

A white column out there, one of the snowmen, became merely part of the snow. But already Grider, his jaw muscles grimly set, was squeezing the trigger again. Again the rifle spoke—in a coughing whisper—and again a snowman fell.

Grider paused for a second to brush a wisp of drifted snow from his telescopic sights. His right hand was stiffening. He hurried his next shot—up to the moment of explosion—but a third man fell just the same.

THE others were in turmoil. They couldn't hear what had slain their comrades. Surely some miraculous sort of death had stricken them down. The cold perhaps had frozen their hearts as they ran—or their lungs had grown solid because they breathed in the cold with open mouths. They did not think to look for bullet holes, because they had heard no rifle.

They plundered the furs of their fallen brethren and dashed on.

They ran slowly, though, because they were more heavily burdened, even as they tried to run faster because they were greatly frightened.

"Damn you!" muttered Grider. "I'll drop you all and not one of you will hurt my conscience!"

He was cast, had cast himself, in the rôle of executioner, and was finding the rôle to his liking. Dead partners must be avenged.

He waited only for his hand to get warm again. He followed on, keeping his head down so that his face would not give him away. His garments, too, were white—and he was an artist at concealment.

Ten minutes later he flung himself down a second time—and two snowmen mingled with the snow! This time the eight men who lived did not pause to loot the fallen. When, fifteen minutes later, three more fell before the silent bullets of George Grider, the five who remained began to throw away even the furs which

(Concluded on Page 124)

The Fourth Ring



When the Bell in the Judgment Hall at the Castle of Ehrenburg Rang Four Times, It Meant an Execution Would Take Place

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A Complete Novelette

By MALCOLM WHEELER-NICHOLSON

Author of "The Dumb Bunny," "The Scarlet Killer," etc.

CHAPTER I

Prelude

KARNTHNERSTRASSE specializes in charming restaurants, but *Der Grune Kakadu, of them* all, had achieved a pervasive and subtle harmony of its own so that its like could not be found in Vienna. And so Charley was convinced.

For a time, the place and, it must be admitted, the smooth mellowness of a bottle of Chateau Suduirut had set Charley to dreaming dreams and imagining vain things. Even Thurston's steady stream of homely platitudes had ceased to bother him. But it was time to come to earth for a space, for Thurston was asking him a question and was awaiting his reply.

"Why don't you land some one of the many females that fall for your Grecian profile?" he repeated truculently.

"Not for mine!" Charley shook his head, then looked off absently over the heads of the crowd. "If I ever married it would have to be some one exactly like the girl in the portrait I told you about."

"Yeah? I remember your coming back from that castle raving about some twelfth-century beauty."

"You'd have raved, too; she was a knock-out—enough to make anyone sit up and take notice." And Charley looked dreamily into the distance, unseeing and unhearing.

"Blonde or brunette?" pressed the literal-minded Thurston.

BLONDE, divinely blonde, as slim as a young birch tree—and her face!" Charley's eyes grew dreamier. "A face as clear-cut in its perfect beauty as a rose-colored cameo, a face that must have shone with glory as—"

"A little powder removes the shine," muttered Thurston, but Charley went on unheeding:

"It was beauty lighted up like a flaming sword—"

"Speaking of being all lit up," Thurston glanced suspiciously at Charley's glass, but his words fell on deaf ears.

Charley did not hear him. "Such a girl is a harbor, a refuge, a haven, a floating from the turmoil of life into quiet waters, an oasis in the desert—"

"A fly in the ointment, sand in the gear-box, a monkey wrench in the machinery," supplemented Thurston.

Charley ceased poetizing and gazed dreamily at his friend through a haze of cigarette smoke.

Suddenly he grew serious and leaned over the table. "But I'll tell you right now—the one girl in the world for me is the replica of that girl in the portrait at the castle of Ehrenburg!"

Thurston gazed at him soberly through his owlish glasses. "If it satisfies you to be in love with a portrait of the middle ages go to it; as for me, I'll pick out something in a 1932 model. But continue; what's the history of this medieval female?"

Charley smoked thoughtfully for a moment. "Queer enough," he said at last. "She disappeared, way back in those early days, and no one ever solved the mystery. Right on the eve of her wedding, too.

"The castle's an eerie old place, still furnished as it was in those days. It even has the old bell-cord the lord of the castle used in his judgment chamber to summon his servants. The family executer was one of the most important of these and had his own special ring.

"I read all about the family in an old book I picked up in their library. Three rings used to mean a signal to the men-at-arms. If a fourth ring was added it meant to the executioner to come to his master, usually to drag some poor nut away to the torture chamber or to cut off his head. The Ehrenburgs were an old family even in those days; Lords of the High and the Middle and the Low Justice."

"How did you happen to run into the place?"

DON'T know. Was out in my car one day and just went there." And Charley looked faintly puzzled himself. "Never heard of it before—it's way off the beaten track."

They sat silent for a space, Charley making designs on the tablecloth with the handle of his fork, his forehead wrinkled thoughtfully. Thurston idly watched the crowded dining room.

"I wonder," mused Thurston finally, "why head waiters invariably look like ambassadors and ambassadors invariably look like something

the cat dragged in?" His eyes were on the tall, dignified *maitre-de-hotel* bowing in distinguished courtesy to some new arrival.

Thurston watched the *tableau vivante;* a stocky, bulging shouldered man with a stiff brush of hair sticking straight up, pompadour fashion, arrogantly demanding one of two vacant tables set against the wall on the opposite side of the room—the head waiter all polite refusal.

"What do you know about that!" Thurston marveled. "The spirit of Verdun, *ils ne passeront pas.* Have to hand it to the head waiter; he must be saving that table for the Rothchilds."

MORE likely he's reserving the table for some Archduke who scared up the price of a round of drinks," and Charley turned around to face Thurston again.

Thurston continued to gaze at the vacant table. Suddenly a flicker of new interest came into his eyes; he sat up straight in his chair, staring with renewed interest.

"That head waiter's certainly going to break in two if he bows any more. The old boy sure has an eye for scenery—you ought to see what's coming to the vacant table. That nightmare lady of yours may be some pumpkins, old-timer, but you should see the dream of bliss that's just come in. If she hasn't got your picture girl stopped forty miles I'll buy the dinner."

Charley turned slowly, and saw two people, an elderly, gray-haired man and an extremely beautiful girl, being ushered toward the vacant table.

"Believe me, she's a sight for sore eyes!" exclaimed Thurston, then his jaw dropped and he gazed in puzzled wonder at Charley, who had turned back to face him.

Charley's face had paled, his eyes round with shocked incredulity.

"She hasn't got the picture girl stopped." He spoke in an awed tone unusual in him. "Why, she's the living image of the picture girl!" And his voice trembled with a strange excitement.

Thurston raised his eyebrows skeptically and fixed his eyes on the girl. He began to look faintly puzzled.

"She certainly is a comfort to the eyesight," he admitted. "Yep, if anything, you haven't done the lady justice. She comes close to being one pluperfect humdinger. I haven't quite grasped the ins and outs of this system of picking winners, but I'd say offhand, after one burning glance at the lady, that there may be something in your ideas after all."

Which was an extraordinary amount of enthusiasm to come from Thurston.

But Charley had shifted his chair around so as to get a better view. There followed a long silence.

Thurston gazed at him in owlish disapproval. "For the love of Mike! Lay off that love-sick stare, you look like a poisoned coyote. Keep on with that Romeo pose and first thing you know her old man will walk over and wrap a chair around your neck!"

CHARLEY abruptly ended his staring. His eyes were unnaturally bright and there was a high spot of color in each cheek. "Good Lord," he whispered half to himself, "it is she. She *is* a living, breathing person!"

"If she isn't a living, breathing person she's the first statue that ever inhaled soup," commented Thurston dryly. Then his eyes narrowed and he peered intently through his horn-rimmed glasses.

"You're not the only sad-eyed whoofle-bird who's giving her the once-over," he announced after a

prolonged scrutiny. "There's that dizzy-looking square-head at the table next to her, the fellow with the perpendicular hair, who's going to have a badly strained neck tomorrow—and the old bird with her is beginning to get peevish."

Charley followed the direction of Thurston's eyes and, sure enough, at the table next to the girl the heavy-shouldered young man, his square face surmounted by a shock of bristling hair, had half turned his chair so that he was staring directly into the girl's face, rudely and insolently. A faint crease of annoyance etched itself on her forehead and the impeccably clad old gentleman with her had raised his monocle to his eye and was glaring in turn at the stranger in polite disapproval.

The elderly escort rose from his seat by the girl, bowed to her in excuse, and marched determinedly to the rude stranger's side. Standing erect and looking very military, he commenced speaking to the young man of the bristling hair.

The stranger rose languidly and made some reply, his eyes heavy-lidded with insolence. Whatever the words, their effect was electrical, for the stiffly polite old gentleman quivered like a hound at the view hallo, and then reached forward with the swiftness of a swordsman at the lunge and smacked the stranger across the face with his open palm.

THURSTON suddenly felt Charley suddenly rise up beside him. "Lay off, Charley, you blamed fool, that's a private war." But Charley was up and away, striding swiftly across the floor, his face set in implacable lines, but with a queer dream-like stare in his eyes, as though he were walking in his sleep.

And he was none too soon. The insolent stranger turned almost purple with sudden anger, his eyes glared half insanely and he leaped at his gray-haired assailant with a hoarse growl, burying his fingers in his throat.

There was a scream from the girl and the music stopped on a sudden note. From the other tables came excited shouts. Charley, impelled by he knew not what instinct, quickened his pace and fairly propelled himself against the tall barbarian. He loosened the fellow's grip with a glancing blow on the cheek bone.

The man straightened up and turned on him, fury in his eyes. Charley drew his breath, coiled himself up like a steel spring, and then lunged, his fist landing with all the stored-up energy of shoulder and back squarely on the fellow's jaw.

There was a dull thud, a grunt and a gasp, and the pompadoured stranger flung out his arms and then plunged headlong with a crash, falling over a table and smashing the crockery as he fell.

CHARLEY stood for a space, rubbing his knuckles. He heard faint cries of "Bravo!" There was a sudden influx of green-clad policemen, much excited waving of arms on the part of the waiters, apologies from the unperturbed *maitre-de-hotel,* and then an exceedingly polite policeman with a notebook asked questions.

After which the rude stranger, his pompadour disheveled, was helped to his feet and hustled toward the door by the minions of the law.

On one side of him Thurston was swearing: "Charley, you double-distilled, triple-dashed, blankety-blank trouble-hunting idiot." And in front of him the unruffled figure of the elderly gentleman was bowing and saying: "Accept my gratitude for your so chivalrous aid, and the thanks of my daughter."

Charley's ears pricked up and the

fog of fighting began to dissipate. He found himself being introduced to a flushed face and the most divinely soft pair of eyes he had seen. From afar off he heard Thurston in conversation with her father, and heard his own polite words sounding as from the lips of a stranger.

Nor did he know what she said.

AND then she and her father were leaving and the world seemed gray indeed until, in quick dazed wonder, he saw her turn and caught a flash of such warm friendliness from the depths of her eyes, that it dazzled him, and he had to be led back to his own table by Thurston, scarcely knowing how he got there.

"Well, that's one way of introducing yourself." Thurston handed him a glass. "Have a drink—you look woozy. And for Pete's sake, take a bracer! You look like a candidate for the nut factory."

"What was her name?" Charley gave a sudden gasp and half rose, wild-eyed and anxious.

"Sit down, sit down," soothed Thurston.

"What is her name—where—"

"Her name, let's see, her old man gave me a card; where did I put it?" And after fishing around in all his pockets, Thurston pulled forth a square of pasteboard. He looked at it for a moment in puzzled wonder, whistling in astonishment, and then sat bolt upright in his chair.

"Either I'm a cuckoo bird in a cocoanut tree or my glasses are on the blink. What was the name of that castle where you were smitten by the lady in the picture? Ehrenburg?"

Thurston cocked a very wary eye at Charley who had half risen in his excitement. "Believe it or not," and Thurston stared dumbfounded at the pasteboard again—then passed it to Charley's clutching fingers. "There it is—*Colonel Count Max Bohm von Ehrenburg!*"

CHAPTER II

Over-Tones

SOME people have intuitive feelings about telegrams. Charley was like this. When the envelope was delivered to him in the Buda-Pesth Hotel, he dreaded opening it. And, when he did finally tear it open, the typewritten words pasted in straggling fashion across the blue sheet fairly leaped at him:

Return Vienna immediately.
Thurston.

What the dickens was up? Why should Thurston be telegraphing him? Their mutual business trails never crossed. They had no interests in common important enough to warrant telegraphing. There was only one thing he could conceivably be impelled to telegraph about and that was the girl.

A certainty came over Charley that something was wrong in her neighborhood. What could be the matter? Was she sick? Had she been hurt in an accident?

As he frenziedly packed, in order to make his train, swift, glinting pictures of the few hours he had spent with her rushed through his mind—that first evening when he had moved quickly and irresistibly to protect her.

Only, as in a haze, did he dimly remember the stately courtesy of her father; it was she that was stamped on his mind like the image on a freshly-minted silver coin.

And could he ever forget the haunting, questioning look in her eyes as he rushed away, his heart singing, forced to hurry to Buda-Pesth to finish some work? How the hours had dragged! And now they were

dragging even more painfully as the train hurried toward Vienna. His nerves were shot to pieces when finally he arrived and hurried down the platform, where he ran plump into the waiting Thurston.

"I figured you for this train," Thurston nodded, peering at him curiously.

"What has happened to her?" Charley burst out without preliminary.

"Oh, you've seen the papers, then?" Thurston appeared almost relieved, as though an unpleasant job had been done for him.

"Papers? I've seen nothing in the papers. What is it? Tell me!" Charley's voice trembled with anxiety.

"WHY," and Thurston looked his concern, "she's disappeared!"

Charley dropped his bag and his face suddenly grew gray and old.

"Disappeared?" he echoed, in a whisper.

"Yes." Thurston looked at him, concerned. "She's been lost nearly a week. The papers have just got hold of it."

"Lost?" whispered Charley, as one thunderstruck. Then with a return of energy, his voice grew sharper. "How? When? Where? For God's sake loosen up and tell me."

"There's something queer about it." Thurston shook his head. "The papers haven't told the whole story. All that's come out so far is that she was last seen around that crazy old castle belonging to her family. But they've searched for her nearly a week now without any result and have nearly given up hope."

"Was she alone? Who saw her last? What—"

"She was out motoring with her cousin—a long, lank drink of water—the young fellow who hangs around her a lot. His car broke down somewhere near the castle. While he was down in the dirt fixing it, so he says, she strolled away. No one has seen her since."

"Which way did she go? Did they search the woods?"

"Searched the woods, dragged the stream, arrested everybody within ten miles, including the cousin, and raised Cain generally. They even searched the castle, which is about a quarter of a mile away from where she was last seen.

"The papers have revived that story about the other girl who disappeared in the middle ages. The girl whose picture you saw in the castle. The old Count thinks it's a curse on his family and has nearly given up hope."

"What does the cousin say?"

"Admits they quarreled and she turned him down. His story is clear enough. They don't seem able to get anything on him. They even arrested the caretaker of the castle, but he was so dumb they let him go. He swore, however, that he hadn't seen her. They examined some wood-cutters working in the forest, but they were so honestly frightened that they let them go as well. My idea is that the cousin has been up to some rough stuff."

"Get me a car right away, will you, old sport?" Charley interrupted brusquely, his forehead wrinkled and his eyes brooding.

"You're not going to the castle?"

"You're darn right I'm *not* going to the castle."

"Well, I might as well trail along," sighed Thurston.

THE atmosphere of the village inn of Ehrenburg was none too cordial. These simple villagers had recently been harried and harassed by minions of the law, until they were suspicious of any stranger within their midst. The departure to the

castle of the two Americans was watched impassively by them, but there was hostility patent in their sullen bearing.

The air was heavy with the threat of storm as Charley drove their car up the narrow road. The approach of evening, intensified by the gathering storm, was still further deepened by the solitude of the dark forest through which the road wound, half buried in fallen leaves. So heavily was the ground carpeted with these latter that the track became more and more uncertain.

"Looks as though we were off the trail," Charley announced grimly, after they had run the car into an impasse formed by the toppled trunks of several trees.

"First time I knew we were ever on it," Thurston heavily sarcastic, gazed around at the desolate scene.

There was only one thing to do and that was to chance it on foot.

The thunder was rumbling threateningly when suddenly they came out on the brow of a hill and saw, below them in the narrow valley, the forbiddingly looking mass of the castle.

It loomed a vast gray bulk of stone, silent and menacing in that desolate place, rearing back sullenly from the marshy banks of an oozy stream that eddied in oily whorls and heavy, silent ripples about the castle base.

CHARLEY stared with a sinking heart at the sinister mass of the castle below, crouched like some huge animal in the bleak valley. Its desolate windows stared at him with all the fixed and vacant intensity of the eyes of a blind man.

He was uneasily aware of these windows, as they slipped and climbed down the hillside.

He hoped for surcease from the staring windows when at last he arrived under the shadow of the castle walls. But he was doomed to disappointment, for the walls were pierced low on their swelling flanks, with long and narrow loopholes from which, he imagined, unseen eyes were watching his every motion.

"That's the worst looking rat-trap I ever set eyes on," volunteered Thurston uncomfortably.

The outer gate was closed, but a small door set within the larger portal gave to their touch and they entered a damp tunnel which pierced the walls and led into the interior of the castle. They hurried through this, to find themselves in the courtyard of this immense silent pile.

THE court was surrounded by what appeared to be separate buildings, each four or five stories in height, with overhanging balconies in medieval style.

The uncomfortable sensation of being watched returned to them tenfold with these tall houses leaning forward menacingly and forbidding, grim disapproval in every line of their beamed angles.

That most oppressive of all silences, the stillness of untenanted human habitations, weighed on Charley like a suffocating blanket. The place was like a town suddenly hushed by a destroying plague.

"Might as well start something," said Thurston as he approached the largest and most imposing of the doors in front of him, picked up the great brass knocker and let it drop.

The massive lion's head on the knocker smashed against the door and shattered the silence with a crash.

What an infernal racket the brass knocker made!

A strange distaste for what the door might disclose came over Charley.

Why was he there? This was

something he could not easily answer. He was there and that was that.

"Come on, step on it," Thurston objured the silent doorway. "We're not bill collectors."

They both started suddenly as a new sound broke on their ears. Dim footsteps were stirring somewhere deep within the bowels of the building. From afar the firm tread started slowly and moved heavily and inexorably toward the upper regions. Dully and fatefully it approached, its steady march growing louder as it came near the door.

They waited, Charley quivering, Thurston uncomfortable. The undeviating tread paused, just inside the entrance. There was a long silence during which they fidgeted uncomfortably.

GLANCING up, by chance, Charley saw with a shock that they were being inspected by a watery blue eye that gazed at them unemotionally and unwinkingly from a peep-hole above the knocker. The staring eye continued its scrutiny so long that Thurston grew restive.

"As soon as you've finished looking us over you might try opening the door," he said irritably.

The eye disappeared. There was a slight pause followed by the rattle of bolts and bars. The door slowly swung open.

Charley recoiled involuntarily at what the doorway disclosed. For something, not unlike an enormous human dumpling, stood there, fearsome in its bulk in the half-light.

Close inspection revealed a huge figure covered with a shapeless mass of flesh, crowned with a short neck supporting a bullet head, which rose turtle-like from the immense shoulders, the whole upheld by fat legs and finished off by ridiculously ineffective looking arms and soft infantile hands.

Closer study made this apparition seem even more remarkable. There was something infantile about the round, smooth, hairless face, something immature in the porcelain blue eyes, the pouting baby-like lips and the childish expression of the features.

"Hello, Kewpie!" ejaculated Thurston, amazement shining from his round glasses.

The creature stared, uncomprehending, and shook its head.

"Ich bin hierher gekommen um einige Skizzen von dom Schlosse zu machen," Charley announced in his best German, figuring that a desire to make some sketches of the castle would subject them to the least amount of suspicion.

The fat caretaker, after a long blank stare, began to nod his head. Then the broad face broke out into the instant cheerfulness of a baby's smile. Charley almost expected him to crow delightedly and clap his hands. The contrast was startling enough in all truth.

"Ja, Ja," he nodded vigorously, *"herein, bitte,"* and hospitably beckoned them to enter, throwing the door wide open.

CHAPTER III

Intermezzo

THE interior of the castle was dark and bathed in the musty gloom of ancient things. The huge caretaker waddled before them, leading them through a succession of badly-lighted corridors, their walls blackened by the smoke of many ancient flambeaus, into high ceilinged, tapestry hung chambers.

Thurston gazed curiously at the armorial bearings of the family, the Golden Boars' Heads of Ehrenburg, which were carved on the backs of

chairs, woven into tapestry and embroidered on the walls.

There was something eerie and ghostlike about the place, impelling Charley unconsciously to walk on tiptoe and speak in whispers. Progress through the halls seemed, to his overwrought nerves, to start strange rustlings and faint whisperings around and about. Try as he might he could not forebear glancing occasionally over his shoulder, so strong was the sensation of being followed.

The picture gallery intensified the feeling of ghostliness a hundredfold.

In spite of the cold hostility of these unsmiling portraits of the dead and gone, Charley pressed on through this over-populated room—pressed on to where a great, full-length portrait hung bathed in the soft flow of light from a rose-colored window.

Here he came to a full stop, his hands nervously clenching and unclenching as he studied again the portrait of an extremely beautiful girl, a girl strikingly like the one he had last seen in Vienna.

This girl in the picture was dressed in medieval costume, something in pale green and violet, with a girdle of jewels about her waist and a golden circlet about her amber-colored hair, an intricately fashioned golden circlet in which rested jauntily a gay peacock feather.

HE heard a low whistle from Thurston, and turned to find him staring in wonder at the picture and scratching his head thoughtfully.

"You'll have me playing in the fields with the daffodils next, Charley. But she sure is a dead-ringer for the beautiful blonde girl and you can't laugh *that* off!"

They turned suddenly to find the gross caretaker eyeing them inscrutably. *"Ein sehr hübsches Madchen,"* remarked Charley carelessly, and they turned away. The caretaker vouchsafed no reply, but led on.

"Whatever became of the bird who was going to marry the girl? What was her name? Gunhilde?" and Thurston jerked his thumb backward over his shoulder, pointing to the medieval portrait.

Charley frowned in an effort to remember. "Nearly as I can remember the old chronicle states that he searched diligently for weeks through the castle. Then one day he suddenly came running out of some big room, the Judgment Hall, I think they called it, shouting, 'all is lost! Too late!' and ran out of the castle and was never seen again."

THEY made their way up a broad staircase. At the head of the stairs the caretaker threw open two great doors.

"Hier ist der Gerichts-saal," he announced.

"The Judgment Hall!" Charley echoed his words, startled, and Thurston's head jerked up quickly.

A strange thrill of excitement ran through Charley. Somehow, in some vague way, he felt that the trail was getting warmer.

The great hall was dominated by a massive, heavily carved throne-like chair that rested on a dais.

Charley felt a curious and inexplicable tightening of his scalp as he entered the hall. He felt an overpowering sensation of having been in that room before, a sensation that amounted to a certainty.

Reason told him that he had not seen this room on his first visit to the castle and that he had never before been in this out-of-the-way corner of the world. But something stronger than reason made him powerless to combat the queer sense of familiarity which this hall wrought in him.

So strongly impressed was he with a sense of familiarity with these surroundings that he even felt the lack of some essential thing in the chamber, some article that he knew should be there and was not. What it was exactly he could not remember, try as he might.

But here, evidently, was the place to start to unravel the mystery of the tragedy that had befallen him with the disappearance of the Viennese girl. Drawing pencils and paper from his pocket, he informed the caretaker that he wished to do some sketching and that it was unnecessary for him to remain.

NODDING violently, the man left, clumping his stolid way down the broad stairs. They listened for several minutes, until the receding beat of footsteps withdrew into some lower part of the castle, and finally ceased.

Quickly putting pencils and sketching pad away, Charley turned to Thurston.

"Thirsty," and he spoke as in a trance, his eyes strange and unseeing, "Thirsty, this room holds the answer!"

"Yeah?" Thurston glanced around the silent hall. "Well, it isn't talking loud enough to strain its vocal cords." But without further ado he followed Charley's example and began to examine the place.

It was circular in shape, conforming to the curve of the tower which housed it. The walls of this great tower were well over six feet in thickness, so thick that the narrow windows were set into embrasures, making a small passageway into the room.

"You have to watch these old places for secret passageways," Charley announced.

"Secret passageways," Thurston sniffed. "There's no secret passageway built that a rough-neck American carpenter couldn't find in twenty minutes." However, contempt for these medieval appurtenances aided them not one whit in their search. There seemed only one entrance or exit—that was the great door by which they themselves had entered.

Yet Charley felt that it was from this room that all the trouble started; it was from here that the girl of ancient days, she of the twisted circlet of gold and the nodding peacock feather, had disappeared, to be followed centuries later by the glorious girl of Vienna. Of this he was certain. Why or how he knew it, he did not pause to analyze.

"Look here, Thirsty," he said suddenly, after examining a section of carved screening near the door. "I've got a hunch."

"Yeah?" Thurston drawled again.

"Don't ask any questions but do as I ask you, will you, old sport?" pled Charley, and Thurston after a long ruminating silence nodded.

"I think there's a telephone of some sort in the village. Go back there and ask the old Count to come down here immediately."

Thurston started to object, then observing the burning intensity of Charley's eyes and the grave seriousness with which he spoke, he shrugged his shoulders and nodded.

BUT don't be a triple-dashed idiot and get yourself served up in a mess of trouble, old sox," he grunted from the doorway. Charley heard his footsteps as he descended the stairs, heard him shout for the caretaker to let him out. Then came the slam of the great entrance door and all was silent again. He was alone. It was time to get to work.

He worked silently and breathlessly, examining each crack and cranny. The place exercised a most odd effect upon him. It was as though the

room waited, tense and breathless for him to divulge its secret—as though it were anxious to render up its mystery.

Suddenly he decided it was time to cease laboring and to commence reasoning. With this in view he made for the great chair itself, stepping up on the dais to seat himself.

As he set foot upon the top step he paused suddenly, then leaped backward and downward with a startled cry.

Some cold object had touched him on the forehead, something dank and clammy with all the chilliness of death itself.

He started, almost paralyzed, for a space; then grinned sheepishly.

"SHAME on you, old horse," he admonished himself, "to shy at a pretty little thing like that," and advanced again to examine more closely the object which had so completely upset him.

It was the intricately carved and chased silver handle of a faded crimson bell-cord that hung easily within reach of anyone sitting in the judgment chair. Seating himself, he recalled the story of this bell and speculated on the number of wretches whose doom might have been sealed by its aid.

He remembered the story of the three pulls on the bell-cord, the call to servants or the men-at-arms, or the final pull that meant a call to the executioner to hurry to his master; this last usually spelling torture or death, or perhaps both, for some poor devil.

He thought of the fateful pause between the three rings and the final dooming fourth—a pause filled with such frightful potentialities for life or death. He visualized the castle as the bell was rung in those far-off days—the cessation of all activity within the walls as men paused to count the strokes, even the stout men-at-arms stopping their dicing long enough to watch the executioner—and the return of the hated figure, in his queer yellow cloak, as he went shambling back to the death chambers with his white-faced prey.

Examining anew the really beautiful workmanship of the silver handle of the bell-cord, he observed that it carried, appropriately enough, a grinning death's head as its central figure.

Idly fingering the bell-cord handle as he mused, he harked back a little to a half-forgotten eulogy of the hereditary executioners of Ehrenburg, a eulogy that he had come across in the musty old history of the family.

The trade had descended from father to son, generation after generation, and carried with it certain honors and rights from the lord of the castle. It carried, as well, the detestation of all other dwellers within the walls.

The chronicle of the hereditary executioners of Ehrenburg only contained a single instance of disloyalty to their liege lords. This concerned the backsliding of one Heinrich, who, as the old chronicle gravely stated, had had the temerity to raise his eyes to the daughter of the house—and had been severely punished for his forwardness.

CHARLEY considered this incident and its bearing on life in medieval times. Then his thoughts led him to the relations of liege lord and executioner. They must necessarily have been very confidential relations. There were so many people who must have been put away quietly in those days for policy's sake.

Yes, there must have been need of

confidence in the relations between executioner and liege lord. He probably called the executioner into conference at all sorts of queer times. Probably the executioner had his own secret passage.

Suddenly Charley sat bold upright—of course there must be a secret passage from this Judgment Hall to the torture chambers! And Gunhilde, that maiden of the long ago, had undoubtedly disappeared from this room—and there was a story of a certain executioner who had paid court to one of the daughters of the house!

He saw, as in a flash, the whole story of the disappearance of that long ago Gunhilde—her wedding night—the queer, hated, twisted figure of the executioner, mad with jealousy, stealing to the Judgment Hall—Gunhilde running away from the wedding supper to hide mischievously from her lover, the executioner's insane rush of jealousy, the secret passage—*that* was the mystery of Gunhilde!

BUT what had this to do with the disappearance of his Elsa, this modern-day goddess who had looked into his eyes with the result that the world for him could never be the same again? He did not know; except that he had a queer, stubborn feeling that he was on the right track.

That stubborn belief had convinced him that Elsa had disappeared in this old castle in some manner. And he knew, without further reasoning, that in this room somehow lay the key to the puzzle.

He must find some exit from this place other than the great doors. There was a secret passage, of that he was certain. The question was, where was the most logical place for it?

CHAPTER IV

Crescendo

AFTER half an hour's steady sounding of walls and tapping of stones, he returned to the center of the room, baffled. He had covered every inch of the place.

He sat again in the judgment chair, his head in his hands, plunged in deep thought; his brain twisted itself in every conceivable direction to puzzle out the mystery of this chamber. He found himself thinking of lanterns, queer old-fashioned lanterns of bronze and horn-shell.

He impatiently put the idea from him and sought to return anew to the search for a solution. But some subconscious impulse in him was forcing his thoughts continually back to lanterns.

He rose from his chair in an effort to be doing something other than sitting there like an idiot musing about old-fashioned lanterns. He firmly put them out of his mind and began again to search the room. He had thoroughly covered every inch of the inside of the walls.

Then he suddenly remembered the strange castle in England, that for centuries had shown some forty-three windows from the outside, whereas it had never been possible, search as they might, to find more than forty-two inside. Why not examine the outer walls of the room?

With a dogged hopelessness he forced open one of the windows and leaned out, scanning the walls as far as he could see. They gave no encouragement. Their gray, lichen-covered surface was unbroken except for a small iron bar that jutted out of the solid masonry near the window ledge and slightly below it.

He withdrew his head again, disappointed. The absolute blankness

of the wall was discouraging. There was nothing on its smooth surface except a small iron projection. He wondered idly what it was for.

Suddenly he raised his head with a start. The iron bar was for a lantern to hang on! Of course! This tower gave directly on the woods and the lantern was put there, an old-fashioned iron and horn thing, to guide returning hunting parties. And why had his brain been so actively concerned with lanterns? This was worth looking into.

HE went back to the window and examined the iron bar closely. There was nothing exceptional about its appearance. He grasped it in his hand. It seemed solidly embedded into the masonry of the wall. He tried pulling it both upward and sideways without any results.

Disgusted with himself for being so gullible, he gave it an angry shove away from him and downward. Then he stood paralyzed for one swift second. The iron bar gave slowly and easily. He heard a sharp click. Turning, his jaw fell. Where before had been the solid unbroken wall of the small passageway leading from the window through the thickness of the wall to the room, there was now framed a small doorway.

Looking more closely he saw that a door had swung inward, disclosing a narrow flight of stone steps that led downward into the darkness.

He put one cautious foot on the first step of the descending stairway. It was sound enough. The next and the next were just as sound. Emboldened, he stepped heavily and confidently on the next step only to have it tremble beneath his tread. The hair rose on the back of his neck. Everything grew darker, deepening swiftly to impenetrable black.

The door behind him swung shut. It was several seconds before he determined the reason. Of course, this step was the counter poise for the door. The minute he put his full weight on it, it had swung to. Something within himself told him there was danger in the next few steps, and he maintained a careful watch hereafter, striking match after match and examining each step before trusting his weight to it.

It was well that he did so.

For the steps came to a sudden end and he found himself poised above a yawning pit. He pulled his searching foot back with a sick feeling at the pit of his stomach, and peered down into the void below him.

It was so black that the flickering light from his match scarcely illumed a few feet. However, he saw enough to realize that anyone falling into that bottomless hole would probably stay there for good.

The air was heavy and damp and stale in the passageway. In the silence that surrounded him like a blanket he could hear the faint lap, lap of water far below.

IT looked like an impasse, an end to his hopes. A sinking sensation came over him. What if this were the sole meaning of the secret passageway? Had a horrible death in this pit been the end of those two glorious women of this ill-starred family? The thought filled him with panic. A cold sweat broke out on his forehead.

Then reason came to his aid. Why should such pains have been taken to conceal this bottomless pit if that were its only reason for being? Of course not. The pit must have been put there to render useless just such expeditions as his. Hope surged up within him again and he started to explore.

Striking matches, he felt of the walls carefully, seeking for some new secret door. His search was rewarded by nothing except a torn finger-nail. Stubbornly he lighted more matches, peering down into the pit before him.

Suddenly he smiled joyfully. He had seen something just as the match died down and went out.

Hastily he lighted another. Yes, there certainly was something. Below and to the right of the last step was a small shelf. It was so placed that a person having knowledge of it could easily find it with his foot in the darkness. This shelf must be a way around the wall of this secret gallery.

He lost no time in testing his theory. He balanced on the narrow footing, squeezing close to the stones. Edging carefully around, he found himself in a new entrance. The passageway had simply doubled back on itself around a false wall.

The steps led downward until they came to a level where the way broadened out and the roof grew higher. Above him narrow loopholes let in some dim light, which enabled him to see a short distance ahead.

SUDDENLY the route he was following turned sharply to the right. He found himself facing a small massive door painted a vivid scarlet and set deeply in the end wall.

Halted by the arresting scarlet of the door, he concentrated his whole being in trying to picture what lay beyond. Not a sound disturbed the silence of this subterranean corridor. The door stood dour and grim as though daring him to solve the riddle which lay beyond its bulk.

Drawing a deep breath, he put a shoulder to the door. It gave noiselessly to his weight. He could see nothing within but impenetrable blackness. He opened the door still further and stepped within, fumbling the meanwhile for matches.

A vast imponderable bulk struck him. He found himself struggling crazily in the blackness. Somewhere there was the clank of a chain. In the fog that gripped his mind he heard a woman's scream.

THERE was the ringing as of a thousand bells in his ears. He fought in a detached sort of way, hearing, as from afar, dim screams and hoarse animal-like bellows, and his own breath rattling in his lungs. He struck again and again, but his blows were like the blows in a dream.

His arm drew back and moved forward—the motion seemed to take eons of time and to land without any sensation of solidity. Something was endeavoring to throttle his windpipe—he was being bent back, back, back, until he ceased to care. The noise of many bells in his ears grew momentarily louder. Then he felt himself drifting, as on some smooth stream, the bells growing fainter and fainter.

A delicious feeling of languor stole over him. He was content to drift.

But the bells would not be stilled. Their ringing increased in loudness. The smooth stream on which he was gliding grew of a sudden, violently agitated. Light flashed in his eyes. He blinked and twisted his head to avoid their glare. He became aware of the steady throb, throb of some mighty engine.

It might be his own heart—he was too tired to puzzle it out. A gray haze seemed to have settled over everything except where the lights blazed.

The myriad flashing of these blazing beacons slowly began to gather into one great illumination. This

dwindled and receded until he saw it finally as a smoking torch that glowed on a wall a few feet from his head.

In attempting to shield his weary eyeballs from the glare he discovered that his hands were bound.

A vast shadow impinged on his consciousness. The vague, formless bulk of this resolved itself into the figure of the fat caretaker of the castle. Incurious, he observed that the huge body of the man was alive with energy. Fantastically enough, the fellow seemed to be skipping around like a child—giggling now and then as at some good joke he was about to play.

GRADUALLY he became aware of another figure within the range of his vision. At the same time he heard a peculiarly horror-stricken series of screams.

It was some time before he connected the two phenomena and realized that the screams were proceeding from the slim figure of this person. The actions of this latter puzzled him. Whoever it was moved forward a few feet, stepped with a jerk and screamed. Then it would recede only to repeat the maneuver.

He was puzzled by it all and found himself suddenly weary beyond all measure. If he only could sleep! He closed his eyes, a move he quickly regretted as he seemed to be sinking rapidly through countless miles of space—sinking so rapidly as to make him violently dizzy.

He opened his eyes again. The light from the torch threw flickering shadows on the bulk of the caretaker. It was certainly the man himself, the queer child-faced, fat individual who had admitted him to the castle. Looking beyond him and to one side, he saw something that hazily piqued his curiosity. He dismissed it as part of this crazy dream but was impelled to look again.

It took form as a queer whiteness against the shadow of the wall. There was something vaguely disquieting about the outline of this white blur. It slowly resolved itself into a skeleton. The bones hung against the wall and seemed to be leaning forward. Then he saw that the form was held up by a steel band around the middle. Queerly enough the ghastly, sightless head was crowned with a circlet of gold from which drooped dispiritedly a bedraggled peacock's feather.

He was worried by this last detail and tried to reason its import. A circlet of gold and a peacock's feather. Didn't the girl of the portrait, she who had disappeared so mysteriously in the middle ages—didn't she have a circlet of gold and a peacock's feather?

And what was that other figure? He could hear a voice now and something strangely familiar about it set his heart to beating. Pleading, sobbing hysterically, begging, her voice was unmistakable! It was Elsa's voice, the thrilling tones of which he had last heard on that incomparable Viennese night.

HIS head cleared as if by magic. He found his brain alert and keen again. He twisted at the rope that bound his hands, tried to loosen the bindings only to find that they cut deeper into his flesh. The shadow of the vast bulk of the caretaker fell over him.

He saw the man approach the one torch and light another from it, sticking it into a second bracket on the wall. The added light cleared up the dusk of the room.

It was shaped like a triangle. In one angle he saw Elsa's figure, her eyes on him in horror and fear. In the other corner were the white

bones of the golden circleted skeleton.

In the center of the room stood the great bulk of the caretaker, a huge axe on his shoulder. He stared curiously at this axe. There was something familiar about it—then with a cold chill he recognized it. It was a broad-bladed and vicious-looking affair, the long sweep to cutting edge proclaimed it as an executioner's axe.

CHAPTER V

Appassionata

THE caretaker was talking wildly. His eyes were bloodshot, and staring insanely, as he stood in the center of the room. The light from the two torches on either side of him glinted from the glittering steel of the axe, whose edge he was testing with his thumb. Suddenly he turned and hurried away to the far corner of the room, the apex of the triangle.

He reappeared from the shadows dragging something. It was a heavy wooden block with two cup-shaped depressions on either side, and a heavy ridge across the center. It was an execution block stained black, and gleaming evilly with ancient blood.

The caretaker pushed and pulled it into the center of the room.

The girl screamed again and again, her hands stretched out imploringly toward the huge maniac.

She saw him push the block into place, saw him step across to the opposite corner and half lift, half drag the young American over the floor to the block. Once there he lifted him to a kneeling position, his hands tied behind him.

Then he picked up the axe balancing lightly on his right arm, while with his left he slowly and inexorably forced the head of the young American into the cup-shaped depression.

She saw the young American struggle; then she screamed again with horror as the great caretaker struck him viciously on the side of the head with his fist, and saw the body of the young man slump unresistingly, his head resting quietly on the block. The caretaker spat on his hands and grasped the handle of the axe.

The light from the torches threw a vast shadow of the caretaker on the wall, a gigantic swooping shadow that moved with startling swiftness. The girl crouched on her knees, moaning in horror.

The details of that scene would be etched in her memory to her dying day. The great bulk of the caretaker, axe in hand, the dully gleaming block with the helpless figure kneeling against it, head outstretched, the flickering light from the torches now flaring in brilliance and now dying down to half light.

She saw the caretaker raise the axe slowly. She buried her face in her hands, moaning.

The deathly stillness that brooded over the cellar room was suddenly broken and she raised her head, startled. A strident clamor of an ill-tuned bell had wakened harsh, sudden reverberations.

SHE saw the caretaker pause and look upward, his mouth hanging open, a look of almost ludicrous surprise on his face.

Again came that strident, jangling ringing. It was followed by the steelly clash of metal against stone—the caretaker had dropped his axe on the floor. He was still gazing upward, a look of fear distorting his broad features strangely.

Again came the clangor of the discordant jangling bell. There was a smothered sob and she saw the huge

bulk of the caretaker topple to its knees, the man was trembling like a leaf, his hands raised as in supplication.

It suddenly flashed on her with the white sharpness of lightning that the bell had rung three times! A chill of superstitious fear sickened her. The ancient bell had rung three times! What could it mean?

Her whole soul and body and every quivering nerve in her system strained for the crash of that fourth ring. The shifting light from the smoky torches threw fitful gleams on the bizarre scene—the ancient block, with the body of the young American slumped over it unconscious, the quaking bulk of the caretaker, half raised from his knees, his straining attitude so marked with horror.

SHE could hear her own heart beating like a throbbing engine. Would the bell never peal forth with that fourth ring?

Whole centuries seemed to drag past in stately progress. It seemed to her that she had been waiting there for countless ages. A dumb gripping paralysis slowly began to steal over her soul—the bell would not ring—the caretaker would finish his grisly task. She bowed her head hopelessly. Her eyes closed.

The fourth ring of the bell burst on the cellar room with a crash as of a world breaking into atoms.

The uproar was followed by a strange cry from the caretaker, a long strangling moan, bestial in its retching pain. The man stumbled to his feet.

"Ich komme, Herr Graf, ich komme!" he sobbed, and lurched forward, arms outspread as though to keep from falling. The girl heard a door slam open, heard stumbling footsteps and queer sobbing noises receding into the distance, until all was silent again.

Her voice came to Charley as from a vast distance.

"Come to me, come!" she was saying. It seemed the first note of sanity in a wildly insane nightmare.

He whipped his flagging spirits into shape and struggled toward the sound, dragging himself along with many pauses to wait for his strength to return.

Through it all, as in a fever, her voice encouraged him. Somehow, he found her. And somehow, in the darkness, protecting arms enfolded him and quick, fluttering hands comforted him and he felt the warmth of wet tears dropping on his face. He was very content to have it so.

The intolerable pain that burned his wrists was miraculously relieved and he found his hands freed. He slowly opened his eyes and caught his breath.

For he was being held tenderly in the girl's arms. She was leaning over him. He came dimly to understand that she needed help as well. Gently taking his nerveless fingers, she placed them on a steel girdle that encircled her waist and from which a chain ran to the wall.

She helped him rise and directed his steps, leading him like a child, to the full length of her chain and pointing out to him a key that hung, diabolically cruel, just out of reach of her outstretched fingers.

HE nearly toppled over with the effort of reaching up for the key, but at last placed it in her hands.

Her arm was about him and her shoulder supported him as they made their way into a larger hall. Charley hazily noticed that the place was full of queer instruments, among which he recognized racks and pinions, thumbscrews, any quantity of fetters and chains and other appurtenances of the torturer's trade.

Suddenly they were surrounded with a welter of strange people, among them he dimly recognized Thurston and the old Count, her father. Tears streamed from the Count's eyes as he held his daughter fast.

HOW pale she was! In a dream-like sort of way, Charley felt his hands being grasped by the white-haired old gentleman and felt a wave of goodwill and gratitude enfolding him. Willing arms aided him. Somehow he found himself in the Judgment Hall.

There seemed to be many people about—especially before the great seat under the canopy. A vague, formless bulk lay prone on the floor. Incuriously he found himself recognizing the caretaker and knew, somehow, the maniac was dead.

A drink of some heady liquor was tendered Charley, and the stinging fire of it cleared his head sufficiently to understand odd phrases that were murmured around him. "Plunged in, foaming at the mouth"—"dropped dead in front of the Count, who was resting in the big seat"—"no one knows, probably heart failure"—"always been a little queer; has been getting worse lately—"

And then *her* voice, a bit unsteadily: "But did you pull the bell-cord, father?" And he found himself hanging upon the reply.

"I cannot remember," replied the Count, in slow thoughtful accents. "I had it in my hand as I sat, after searching vainly for the young American. It is very likely that I pulled it unconsciously—or it may have been some power that used me as an instrument to prevent this poor insane creature from doing harm."

Her father's eyes clouded. "Strange that his line should come to an end in this fashion. You know"—and he turned to Charley, who was now leaning on Thurston's arm—"his family have served mine for countless generations. It is said that in the ancient days his ancestors were the hereditary executioners for the Counts of Ehrenburg."

There was a silence after this, then a vast buzzing of conversation, through which he heard the Count's voice again. "Poor Gunhilde, chained up there to die—it is too horrible, but I cannot help feeling, also, sorrow for that unhappy young Falkenstein who was to have married her."

Charley heard his own voice, sounding flat and weak in his ears. "What did you say his name was—the young man who was to have married Gunhilde?"

"Falkenstein, Karl von Falkenstein, a young nobleman from a nearby family," and the happy old gentleman turned to answer some question put to him.

THE car was an interminably long time in coming. Elsa was helped into the seat beside him and he put his arm around her, protectingly, before all the world. The old Count, her father, being wise in his day and generation, said nothing. But Charley, half-dozing, heard his voice above the sound of the motor: "And this so-brave young man who has returned you to me—I have not heard his name?"

Charley knew that she could not answer. With eyes half-closed he essayed to save her that embarrassment.

"Name is Falconstone, Charles Falconstone," he muttered—"people live in Boston, United States, America." His words ran together drowsily. "Came to America from Austria . . . long time ago . . . must have been . . . long time ago," and he leaned his aching head against the golden amber of her hair, pillowed against his arm.

BLACK MAMBA



A Dramatic Story of Suspicion and Treachery Among Diamond Hunters and African Natives

By FERDINAND BERTHOUD

Author of "Tarantulas," "Adventure in Capetown," etc.

OLD BILLY NATTRASS, grizzly-bearded and sun-cracked, squatted on his haunches beside the small cook fire which blazed redly in the quick gathering African darkness.

"End o' the year day after tomorrow, Jack," he growled, his eyes glittering angrily in the firelight under a thatch of bushy gray eyebrows. "One more year o' life gone plumb to Hell!" Old Billy Nattrass' weathered face twitched nervously.

The sandy-haired younger man smiled wryly at him across the flames. At twenty-six the everlasting blazing sun of the veldt had etched deep lines in Jack Hutchinson's features.

"Well, we can't be blamed. We've both worked hard enough, Billy. Our luck is bound to turn," the American soothed.

As he spoke his glance sought anxiously the muddle of rough mud huts near-by which housed the mine natives. From their unusual quietness he knew the Kaffirs must be

listening to their conversation and his lips tightened. The white M'Lungus had been quarreling too much lately for the good of the camp morale. Since he and Billy sent up Piet, the big Mission-trained Kaffir, for stealing supplies, the rest of the crew had been sullen.

"Why, Tom Cullinan found the world's biggest diamond, the Cullinan, only eighteen miles from here, and we both know that Christian Joubert's picked up stones right here on his own farm, hasn't he?" Jack continued placatingly.

"But why haven't we found any stones? Why haven't we had luck?" Billy snarled back at the younger man, his old eyes snapping viciously. "I'll tell you why—I think you're holding out on me!"

THE other didn't answer and Billy lapsed into grumpy silence. Annoyed, yet amused, Jack Hutchinson glanced covertly at Billy Nattrass as a boy would at his own father. Old Billy knew odd, untrod corners of Africa as well as he knew his own name.

In forty years of wandering the old prospector had made twenty-four separate strikes, and twenty-four times had booked his passage back to the old country. And exactly twenty-four times he had gone on a drunk soon as he'd reached Capetown and never once set foot aboard ship.

But after a year together Jack had learned there were worse comrades than old Billy. Erratic though he was, no one in all the far-flung diamond country knew better the elusive business of searching for the precious stones.

Billy suddenly came out of his silence. "A year gone an' all my money wasted!" he said fiercely.

"Haven't I lost a year and most all the cash that I had, too?" Jack said curtly. "All I've got left is only about enough for a further six months' option and expenses."

"What in hell's the use o' buying options on empty groun'?" he said suspiciously.

"Just satisfaction, Billy!" he said tersely. "I may as well go the whole hog as to clear out and let somebody else come in and go on where we've left off, and make a fortune."

"Who's goin' to make a fortune?" Billy spat. "You're crazy. If we can't find di'mon's goin' over that much bluegroun', well, there ain't no di'mon's here."

"There must be," persisted Jack. "This is good ground. You know how much depends on luck. We've just missed the good spots, that's all."

For a long moment the older man stared into the flames intently. He seemed brooding over something. Suddenly he spoke. "Didn't you say ye had 'nough left to buy a further six months' option?"

"Yes," Jack admitted wonderingly.

"I see! Now I got ye at last!" Billy shouted, springing to his feet. "You've been spottin' out di'mon's all the while an' not tellin' me! Now that the year's option's run out an' me broke ye're goin' to buy a new option for yourself, an' cut me out! Me who has taught ye everything ye know!"

JACK grinned. Another tantrum. "Don't be such an old ass, Billy," Jack said good-humoredly. "I didn't say anything about a *one-man* option, did I? You're in any deal with me. Why start a quarrel about nothing, after being together and such friends for so long?"

"You're lyin'," the old man shot. "Holdin' out on me—I can see it all clear now!"

The loneliness of the African veldt does queer things to men. Loneliness plus disappointment. This

wasn't just another tantrum. To Jack's astonishment Billy jumped round the fire toward the younger man. Jack rose to meet him. Clawing, old Billy's fists clutched Jack's shirt sleeves, and shook him. But Jack caught him easily by the arms and pushed him away and held him off. The revolver that old Billy that morning had strapped to himself in the hope of killing a prowling half-jackal dog didn't worry Jack at all.

"You damned old fool!" Jack said firmly. "Do you want me to smack you? Sit down, Billy, and be quiet!"

"You be quiet, too!" the old man snarled, releasing his desperate and hopeless clutch.

Jack caught him by the pants and the back of his shirt collar. "You get to bed, Billy!" he laughed, and started aiming him, struggling toward his hut. "I've had enough of this. Don't be such a fretful old baby!"

"Baby?" Billy started to yammer. "Why, you insult—!"

Then both white men froze in their tracks.

FROM inside of a wattle and daub hut that stood near the corrugated hut of the white men came a shrill wail.

"We-e-e! The old M'Lungu dahgehle! The old white man is drunk!" Close following the sound was the shuffling of feet, and a confused sibilant whispered tittering. Over again eerily echoed "We-e-e!" Then finally a loud derisive "Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Jack's face sobered. He'd been afraid of this. He released his grip on Billy. The latter stood still cocking his ear toward the hut.

"Me drunk?" Billy burst out. "Why, you black devils! Say I'm drunk? I'll show ye!"

Wrenching free from Jack, Billy leaped to the doorless entrance of the partners' iron hut close by. He found by feel a hippopotamus-hide sjambok hanging just inside the doorway. Then with a single bound he was across the yard and slashing viciously into the door of the mud hut. A dozen or so howling naked Kaffir mine "boys" rushed pell-mell out of the shack, with shrill screams of dismay.

"Say I'm drunk, will yer?" old Billy threatened, as he tore after them. "Ye dirty dogs! I'll flay ye alive! I'll cut the very livers outen ye!"

Almost frothing, Billy kept up the hopeless chase in the darkness.

As Billy panted around the back of the hut something of a sudden barred his way. He drew back in astonishment. A tall figure stood ominously still in the darkness.

"M'satinyoka! Son of a snake!" a voice hissed at him in native tongue.

Billy pulled away a couple of steps. Viciously he tried to lash out with the whip. But a vigorous hand caught the sjambok even as it came down, and, but for the loop round his wrist, would have wrested it from him. In English, a Kaffir voice snarled distinctly:

"Whip me, will you? I kill you, ol' white man, befo' I done!"

OH, it's you, is it, Piet?. Billy roared. "You back here, ye thievin' devil? Out of jail, are ye? Loose that sjambok! I'll thrash the life outen ye!"

The Kaffir glowered down at him. His huge left hand clutched a heavy-headed wood knobkerrie. "You thrash me? I kill you! I'd kill you now you ol' fool, but for the other M'Lungu know I heah!"

"Ye lousy mission rat!" Old Billy roared up at him nothing daunted. "Ye know too much! Ye got too much muddled-up eddication! Loose my sjambok! Hear me?" Suddenly

Billy's angry mind flashed to his seldom-carried gun. "Loose me, ye black devil!" and his free hand shot to his hip.

In the dense gloom the Kaffir's cat eyes saw the action. He stepped back and the whip came free.

"You try to kill me and see what happen!" The native challenged, crouching like a huge cat. "I kill you! I kill young baas too! You two thrash me once; that 'nough!"

"Thrash ye?" Billy crashed on threatening Piet with the gun. "Ye devil, I wish we'd finished ye! We caught ye stealin' our dynamite an' sellin' it to Dutchmen for sinkin' wells. We caught ye stealin' rations. Why you only got three months in the pen at Capetown is more'n I know!"

The Kaffir, a huge black figure muttering curses, edged out into the white moonlight. Turning, he peered back as deadly as any snake at Old Billy. "Tonight the old baas got best of me!" he grated. "Then come many mo' night and theh be no white man! You wait, baas!"

SWEATING, at the same time shivering with cold in the icy night air, Billy came back to where Jack was sitting.

"Piet's loose at last," he said gloomily. "There's more bad luck for us. He'll raise hell with the crew."

Jack calmly lifted a burning stick from the fire and lighted his pipe. "You'll feel better in the morning, Billy. So Piet's out again, eh? That doesn't sound good. That mission-spoilt Kaffir's dangerous." He paused and forced a laugh. "Say, Billy, I envy you one thing, though. All you need do is get angry, and you're drunk!"

But old Billy stalked into the hut muttering to himself while Jack smoked on in worried silence till the embers dimmed. Then wearily he followed his partner.

The next morning, some five miles from the camp of the two partners, a four-mule Capecart drew up to the long Kaffir-built mud and thatch house of Christian Joubert. A beetle-browed, hook-nosed man sitting beside the driver looked for an instant to the hundred-year-old private graveyard fifty yards away, then peered at the sprawled shack of the same antiquity.

"Morrow, tante," the hook-nosed man greeted the toilworn woman in the doorway. "Is Meinheer Joubert by the house?"

THE wide-linen-bonnetted Dutch vrouw grinned vapidly. "Nein. Meinheer Joubert drove into Pretoria yesterday."

"Gone into Pretoria?" the hook-nosed man repeated, trying to hide his disappointment. "I didn't know old Oom Paul's late Mining Commissioner would ever go into Pretoria now that the verdomde British held it."

The woman laughed and showed a cavernous mouth filled with black, torn teeth; a brood of grinning, tattered children ranging from eight to twenty-eight now surrounded her. "The British all right," she commented with naive shrewdness. "Meinheer Joubert groote man. He knows plenty Englishmans."

"Yes," the visitor agreed. After all Christian Joubert had become a millionaire by the bribes of British prospectors as well as German gold miners while holding the office of mining commissioner. "I've heard he's a great man. The Meinheer has a big farm here."

"Two hundred thousand acre," the woman informed him proudly.

The visitor gazed away across the rolling, bushy land. His eyes were narrowed. Good diamond country.

he considered silently. "How much of it old Billy Nattrass and his partner got an option on?" he said aloud.

"Fifteen thousand acres," the woman said.

"And their option expires today?" the hook-nosed man queried, though he already knew.

"Yes, tomorrow. The 'boys' say they fight all time. Want kill one another. Their 'boys' tell my 'boys' an' they tell my sons, my sons tell Meinheer Joubert." She grinned—proud of her knowledge.

THE dark man smiled slyly. That was why he was there. It was his business to know things.

"Cutspan, Karl," he commanded his black driver, "and stay here with the Capecart till I come back. How far is it over to where I can find Heer Nattrass, tante?"

The woman pointed vaguely. "Two mile. Three mile."

"Um?" the dark man grimaced. "That makes five miles each way in this country."

The black moving shadows cast by the bushes near the mouth of the mine had almost disappeared as the sun rose to its noon-day heighth later that morning.

Billy Nattrass was working at the windlass, sweat streaming from his face in the heat. He paused and turned. Through the thick bush he'd heard the clink of a booted heel on rocks. The bushes parted and the hook-nosed man stepped out into the small opening.

"Hello, Mr. Nattrass," the newcomer panted.

Billy looked shrewdly at the smiling stranger. One of those men who fatten on the labor of others. He'd seen the type before.

"Hello," he came back without cordiality. "Lost yer way?"

"No," the man dissented, with firm assurance. "You're Nattrass, aren't you? Old tante Joubert described you to me."

Suspiciously, Billy looked him over. "An' what was ye wantin' if I was Billy Nattrass?"

"Business," the man came straight to the point. "My name's Ed Lazarus. I live in Pretoria. I've heard that the option on this mining ground was expiring, and that you hadn't found any diamonds on the property in a whole year, and were sick of it. I understand you and your partner are going to give it up."

"An' what about it?" Billy questioned.

Lazarus' sharp eyes searched Billy's weathered face. "Look here, Nattrass, because you haven't found diamonds on this huge lump of land doesn't prove that there aren't any here. Your option expires at midnight tonight. Are you going to take it up?"

FOR a moment Billy pondered; the thing was so sudden and unexpected. The peevish one-sided quarrel of the previous night came back in all its force. Bitterness again welled up.

"Stop a minute," old Billy hesitated. "Let's step outen the open, an' into the cover o' these denser bushes. Hutchinson's at a shaft half a mile from here, an' the bush 'tween us is thick, but he may be sneakin' along at any time. Over there, he won't see us here if he comes."

Lazarus smiled confidently to himself as he followed.

"Hello! What was that?" Billy broke off. "A rabbit?"

The stealthy sound of underbrush giving way before a moving body abruptly died. The visitor looked round for the source of the noise. "Big lizard, I imagine," he commented. "You're jumpy, old timer."

"Nothin' to worry 'bout, anyway,"

Billy allowed, as they moved deeper into the bush. "Say, Mr. Lazarus—Lazarus, ye said it was, didn't ye?—how do you know all these details 'bout my business, an' what do ye want to butt into it for?"

Lazarus assumed a crafty smile. "Can't you guess?" he said smoothly. "Your fighting with Hutchinson is common gossip. Joubert spread it. You've been quarrelling off and on for months. What I want to do is to help a fellow human being out of a hole."

"An' help yerself," Billy added, half assured. "Yes. I am short o' money. Ye've got that much right. Let's get the full strength of all this. What scheme was ye thinkin' o' swindlin' me with?"

The visitor's look was pained. From an inside pocket he brought out a ready written paper. "Swindle, Nattrass? I'm surprised at you! It's to save you being swindled that I came here. Of course I'm not offering to do what I have in mind for nothing. I'm not saying I am. That wouldn't be sensible. I want an even fifty per cent interest for all I do."

"For doin' what?" Billy questioned. "Get to the point!"

"For staking *you* personally to a new option, Nattrass. Look here, Nattrass, you're blind! Your partners after that fresh option! He's already spoken about it to Joubert. Why does he want it? Because he knows there's diamonds here, that's why! Now I'm willing to back you and I'll take up the option in your name and mine. Fifty-fifty. Get me?"

Billy Nattrass nodded slowly.

"JUST get Hutchinson drunk," went on Lazarus. "Keep him out of sight until after I've driven back into Pretoria in the morning, and I'll renew the option in your name. As co-maker of the present option you've got a right to do that. Squeeze Hutchinson out!"

The petty soreness at Jack, rankling, suddenly became akin to actual hatred. "What'll I get outen it, Lazarus? How'll I be protected?"

"Here," Lazarus pushed the paper under Billy's nose. "Read this. I promise to give you one half of any profits made from mining the ground. See it down there?"

Lazarus didn't mention that diamonds had just been found on the lava flow both above and below Joubert's land, and that in a week all Pretoria would know of it and be after the land near-by.

"Now, doesn't that sound good to you?" he went on. "Just you and me, and me with plenty of capital? That's better than being bilked by any thieving partner who's working on a shoestring, isn't it?"

FOR a moment old Billy stood silent, and cogitated. And as he pondered, catlike, a huge Kaffir skulking in the bushes drew closer in. Nearer and nearer crept Piet, unseen by the two men, his ears eager for such words as came down the wind to him.

"Well," Billy delivered at last. "If ye'll promise to let me mine it I'll think it over. I want me reg'lar job, mind ye."

"Certainly," the visitor agreed. "That's but natural. I'll do anything in reason that you ask. But about this Hutchinson? Can you get him out of the way till tomorrow night? How'll you do it?"

Piet, the Kaffir, caught a word here and there. And as he listened his eyes gleamed with his plan.

"I c'd lower him into one o' the shafts in the mornin' Lazarus," said Billy Nattrass slowly. "Send him down to bring up the tools, or somethin' like that. Then I c'd pull up

the bucket an' leave him. There's one shaft with a forty-foot drive at the bottom of it. He'd have room to mess 'bout an' enjoy hisself down there. That'd show him to try to trick me."

"Fine," the visitor admired. "And you'd be at the shaft without any Kaffirs knowing of it, and do the whole thing yourself?"

Billy nodded. Already he'd told the Kaffirs their job was finished. "No trouble 'bout that, Lazarus. They're quittin'. They'll be at a kraal three miles away from here an' soused to the eyes on their pay 'fore moonrise tonight."

Of a sudden the importance of the business flashed back to him. "How 'bout this 'greement ye got, Lazarus? How 'bout me an' you signin' it 'fore witnesses?"

"Of course, of course," the other instantly assured, well knowing that none of Christian Joubert's voortrekker Dutch family could either read or write, and that they'd but sign with crosses. "You walk over with me to Joubert's place. I'll get the old tante and some of her sons to sign."

Still half ashamed, Billy held back. "Very well," he finally agreed. "I need some extra money. It's 'bout time I had a bit o' extra luck. An' say, Lazarus, I been thinkin' 'bout takin' a trip back to the ol' country. Let's toddle over, an' get this damn thing done. I'll show the young whipper snapper!"

AS the pair moved away, Piet—tall, thick-lipped and muscular—rose gracefully from his crouching behind the dense bush. Glowering, hissing, his thick lips parted. As a cat looking at a bird out of reach, yet doomed, his eyes peered after the pair. His large, white, even teeth clicked savagely. The heavy-headed knobkerrie came up and viciously shook. Crouching again, the native went through a barbaric pantomime of slashing and stabbing.

"Luck of a witch!" he hissed, in Kaffir, after the disappearing men. "Only the white stranger saved you, ol' baas! Only his being here stopped me from pounding your rotten brains out!"

Then cursing, he stopped, and went over such odd words as the vagrant wind had brought him. "Down the shaft to pick up tools? The young baas to go down the shaft? Death for both of you! For you and the young baas! But not the death of men! No! The death of outcast, dirty dogs!"

For a second he pondered. Two of them? His ready plan would do for only one. Then his hand tightened on his club. Glowering again, his eyes rested on the knobkerrie, and he swung it viciously as if gauging a distance. *That* would do for the other.

OLD BILLY NATTRASS stood at the head of the mine shaft next morning. The red sun was halved on the horizon. The air was still. Bush two or three feet high came almost up to the entrance. Lying about on the trampled, bare spot around the opening were torn canvas sacks that had carried fuse and dynamite and other supplies.

Billy jerked his thumb toward the windlass. "If I lower ye will ye see if we left anything in the drive, Jack?" he asked nervously. "There may be some tools down at the bottom."

Jack stepped over to the windlass. "We'd better get 'em Billy," he agreed. "We'll have more use for them."

Billy became solicitous. "Be careful how ye go down, Jack. This shaft ain't been used for a few days."

"Lower away!" The other laughed, and climbed into the bucket.

Alone, his old brain weary with his conflicting thoughts, Billy put all his weight to letting the bucket down steadily and evenly. The slightest release, and the bucket might slip out of control. The rough windlass crunched, and the rope ran out creaking. Perhaps thirty feet; another ten more.

"Nearly down?" Billy shouted as he peered over the side.

Suddenly, lightning-like, from his trembling, nervous fingers the windlass handle tore from his grasp. Deprived of his hold, the handle flashed up twirling and sent Billy staggering as he lunged to grasp it. For half a dozen steps he reeled backwards, then recovered himself quickly. The ominous crashing clank at the foot of the shaft brought him leaping to the edge of the rope.

"Jack!" he called shrilly. He fell to his knees. "Are ye hurt, Jack? Are ye dead?"

Then he stopped. His voice died in his throat.

FROM out of the forty-foot drive —the tunnel that made off to the side—he saw wriggling a long black thing as thick as a child's wrist. A slim and deadly thing that raised its small venomous head a foot high. Eyes in the head of the fourteen feet of black devilment peered at the bucket and noted its rocking movement as it stilled. Swift as a bullet, the vile thing struck at the steel side.

A black mamba! Death in its most horrible form. Silently, frantically, old Billy pulled himself together. Forgotten was his fight with Jack—his imagined wrongs! He only knew that his carelessness might well cause Jack's death. There was only one possible thing to be done. And that had to be done *then*, before Jack became conscious and moved!

At the bottom of the shaft was crumpled the unconscious white man. On the level floor the snake was still watching the bucket. Its slender raised head was swaying slowly.

The black mamba wasn't a night snake. It hadn't fallen there by accident. It had been dropped there and, if for anybody, it was meant for him. But Billy, instinctively knowing all that, wasn't bothering with the question of how it had gotten there. He couldn't go for top boots. There was no time. What was done must be done right there.

Tip-toeing, awkwardly in his earnestness, he ran to a couple of torn sacks lying near, and pushed them up inside the legs of his dungaree trousers, then padded in other sacks until the legs were bulged almost taut. The snake wouldn't strike higher than his knees, the fangs wouldn't go right through to the flesh, he thought. Then perhaps they might. But there'd be time.

For just one second he touched the dog-killing gun he still carried, then jerked away his fingers. He'd only miss the slim thing if he shot at it. He'd enrage it. He couldn't do that.

LIPS twitching, he snatched up a pick from the discarded tools lying near him. Praying to all the gods he knew; not knowing he was praying; he slipped the handle of the pick through his belt and clutched the rope.

"If Jack'll only lay quiet just one more half minute," he silently muttered on the prayer. "If he'll—"

Something twirling whizzed by Billy's face just as he lowered himself over the edge of the shaft. The missle passed so close that he felt the wind of it. Wincing, his eyes followed the whirling thing, then

flashed round to the spot whence it had come. Fifty yards to one side, half hidden in the denser bush, was Piet. He was staring balefully at the wasted knobkerrie he had hurled.

The howling curse rising to Billy's lips was smothered. Frantic, Billy's hand sought the gun. He drew it. Then, sick at its uselessness, he instantly pushed it back. The noise of the report would finish things at the bottom of the shaft. Below and above he had to fight by only his wits.

Quick as himself, the Kaffir caught the hand going to the gun. Abruptly he ducked into the bush and a faint creep of the leaves told Billy where he went.

One swift glance down into the shaft. Jack yet lay motionless.

Leaving his hat on top of the shaft as a decoy to Piet, he caught the ropes and went down it. Praying that Jack wouldn't waken, he went down silently hand over hand. Down twenty feet, down thirty feet, down till one foot, fishing around, felt no further rope. Then for one single instant Billy stopped.

He had no plan of action. It was no use making one. He'd just drop on the thing, and trust that he lit standing. Trust that he'd landed so that it couldn't pull back to strike.

FOR the minutest instant he peered below him. The snake's head now was higher, was nosing the walls. Head still high, it crossed directly beneath him, heading towards Jack. The deadly head passed his feet.

Then Billy jumped.

Twelve inches behind its head one foot crushed on it. Quick as the stroke of an expert swordsman, the head flashed viciously round and the long fangs struck into Billy's padded leg. Mad, crazy with pain, the snake flapped away again, then rapidly struck again and still again. And its tail flailed and hideously writhed and circled. Thrashed Billy's legs and over his arms and hands.

Wild as a man violently insane, Billy crashed and pounded with the pick handle. Then he dropped the pick, and stooped and clutched the mamba. Close behind its head, he caught it. Viciously, just as an enraged monkey would, he squeezed with all his strength to stay the body working on through his grasp. Then he rubbed the head to bloody splinters. Rubbed it against the wall of blueground. Rubbed it, then dropped it, and snatched up the pick once more.

THEN of a sudden, came the realization of the vengeful Kaffir up on the surface. He must get up to him. Piet could cut the rope. Hurriedly he threw the pick out of his way. Twirling, it hit the side of the shaft and kicked over and spun. A fall of deep blue rock loosened by the pick and clattered down on it.

Behind him, touching his padded legs, something stirred. A man sighed drowsily. His hand on the dangling rope old Billy whirled about.

"Better, Jack?" he whispered quickly. "Comin' outen it lad? I got to get back up, Jack. Quick!"

Blood trickled down the other's forehead, but he wiped it away with his wrist and strove to sit up. "Wha-wha-what was that?" he managed to get out. "What's the black muck? Snake?"

Billy didn't answer him. Hurriedly he was reaching as high as he could on the rope; besides the snake and the native above he already was thinking of Lazarus and what a fool he's been.

"I got to climb up!" he said swiftly. "I got to get ye out, Jack." Then to himself he muttered. "An' I got

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to go to Joubert's an' borrow a horse an' ride into Pretoria. I got work to do today."

A rock struck the head of the rope as Billy clambered up. It cannoned off it and bounced from side to side to the bottom of the shaft. Another rock struck the wall of the pit, richochetted onto Billy's shoulder and pounded on down. Half way up the rope, Billy peered above him. Over the rim of the hole protruded a villainous, brutally savage face.

"Son of a snake! How do you like snakes?" the infuriated Piet hissed.

Of a sudden the Kaffir's black arm reached out. Something flashed in his hand. Gasping, Billy's heart almost stood still. Leaning over, the native made a slash at the rope with a knife. Billy felt the rope shiver as he struck it.

Billy clung on one-handed as he desperately pulled out the dog-killing gun and fired blindly upward. The Kaffir winced and collapsed backwards, squealing. Safe out of sight, crouching low, left handed, he hurled rock after rock and sand down the open mouth of the shaft.

Eyes half closed, the gun back in its holster, Billy went grimly up. A rock gashed his cheek, one split the skin of his scalp, but he kept on. At last he came to the top. At once Piet swung the heavy knobkerrie at him with a swishing left-handed swing.

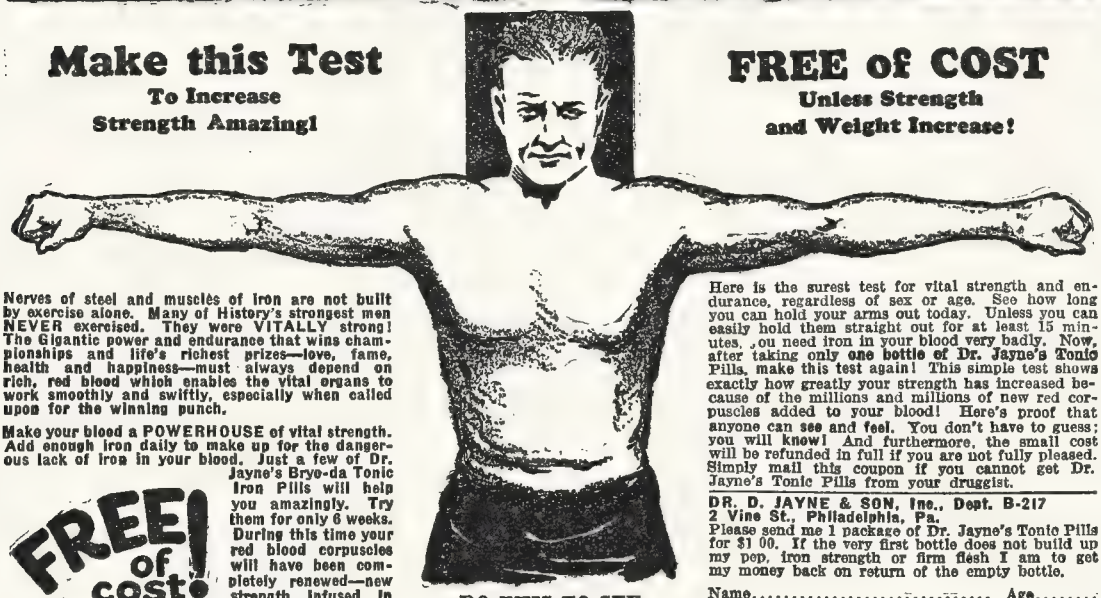
FAINT, fumbling, batting the dirt out of his filled eyes, Billy managed to dodge. The Kaffir was now only four feet of him, and he leaned down and struck viciously at Billy's gun with his knobkerrie. The awkward blow missed as Billy all but lost his desperate hold on the rope as he dodged again.

With the force of the blow the Kaffir had reeled, and half turned away. Half-blind, Billy peered

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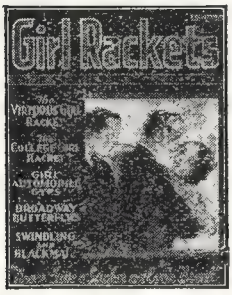
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PARTIAL TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I
LADIES MUST LIVE—HOW DO THEY GET THAT WAY—AND WHY? THEY EVEN DO IT IN OLD JAPAN

CHAPTER II
THE VIRTUOUS GIRL RACKET—AN EXTRAORDINARY STORY OF CHASTE AND UNCHASTE GIRLS WHO WORK MEN FOR ALL THEY'RE WORTH

CHAPTER III
THE LOVE RACKETEERS—THE "MARRY 'EM AND MAKE 'EM — PAY" RACKET IS AS OLD AS HISTORY AND ALWAYS GETS THEM.

CHAPTER IV
THE GOLD-DIGGER—THE BROADWAY BUTTERFLY—GIRLS WHO "NEVER GIVE A SUCKER AN EVEN BREAK."

CHAPTER V
GIRL AUTOMOBILE GYPS — GIRLS WHO ASK FOR A HITCH — WITH STRANGE CONSEQUENCES—AND THE GAMBLING RACKET

CHAPTER VI
THE NOBILITY RACKET—THE BIGGEST MONEY PRIZES GO TO THE BRAINY TYPES—THE MOST DANGEROUS OF ALL

CHAPTER VII
CREEP JANE'S PROGRESS — WHAT HAPPENS TO THE GIRLS WHOSE RACKETEERING IS AT FIRST CONFINED TO BAGGING FREE MEALS.

CHAPTER VIII
SWINDLING AND BLACKMAIL—SENSATIONAL STORIES OF VULTURES IN HUMAN FORM WHO PREY ON THE EMOTIONS OF INNOCENT VICTIMS.

CHAPTER IX
JUST DOWN FROM COLLEGE—A COLLEGIATE MANNER. AN AIR OF NONCHALANCE AND PLENTY OF NERVE ARE THE STOCK-IN-TRADE OF CERTAIN UNSCRUPULOUS RACKETEERS

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through his dirt-filled eyes, and pulled the trigger straight at the sleek black side.

Three shots. Then the gun fell clattering from Billy's grasp to the bottom. Struggling, clutching at roots and grass, Billy pulled himself on and out with his last atom of strength.

Flat on his back, and close to the dead Piet, Billy lay for a moment half insensible. A vulture soared low and looked down on him with hope at his expressionless eyes.

A half hour later Billy knelt over the bruised, shaken Jack whom he had drawn up on the windlass. Tenderly as any mother, he brushed the blood away from his young partner's head. He swore lustily to hide the suspicious moistness in his eyes.

"That lousy Piet almost did for us with his snake," he muttered. "It must have been Piet. Black mambas mate for life. They run in pairs an' they don't tumble into mine shafts without their mates. Not black mambas!"

"I got to get ye to camp an' get ye well, Jack," he went on more to himself than to this semiconscious partner. "Gosh! Jack, if that thing had a-killed ye—"

Jack struggled to his feet, and shakily took a couple of steps. "I'm all right," he said weakly. "I can walk to camp all right

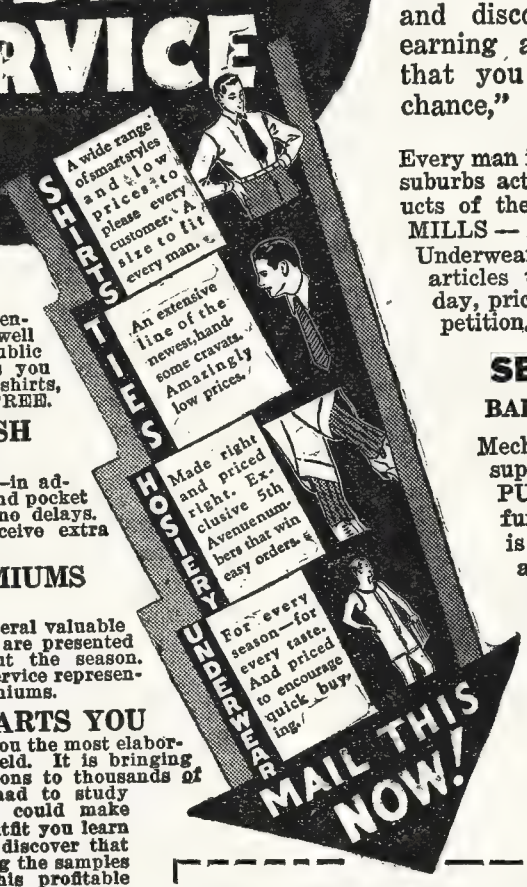
Abruptly Billy, too, was back on his feet. His old face haggard, he touched Jack on the arm.

"Ye sure ye c'n make it by yerself, no kiddin', eh?" he questioned, yet now knowing quite what he could do to undo the damage that so worried him. "I got to get along quick. Damned quick! I got to ketch a man 'fore he gets to Christian Joubert in Pretoria!"

"Pretoria? What's the trouble, Billy?" Jack asked sharply.

The old man hesitated, then blurt-

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ed out the truth. "I been playin' ye dirt Jack," he confessed. "I got another man to go an' try to sneak the option ye want offen ye. I been tryin' to skin ye!"

"Have you, you old idiot?" Jack suddenly laughed.

Before Billy's startled eyes he pulled a crinkled paper from his pocket. One finger in emphasis tapped it.

"Billy, as a sneak you're a fizzle! A washout! You couldn't sneak anything off me. See this? See this option?"

"Option?" sputtered Billy with blank amazement.

"Sure! Option! I bought this off old Christian Joubert day before yesterday, and he's gone into Pretoria to register it. See your name on it? You're my partner same as before! For another year anyway."

Billy's face twitched and his old knees gave way suddenly. Then as he sat down weakly he looked up at Jack.

"Why, you young rapscallion," he said fiercely, but he choked on the words as Jack grinned down at him.

Without trusting himself to speak, he thrust up a weathered hand which met Jack's firm grasp.

"Luck!" muttered Billy. "Hell! We're bound to have luck this time—"

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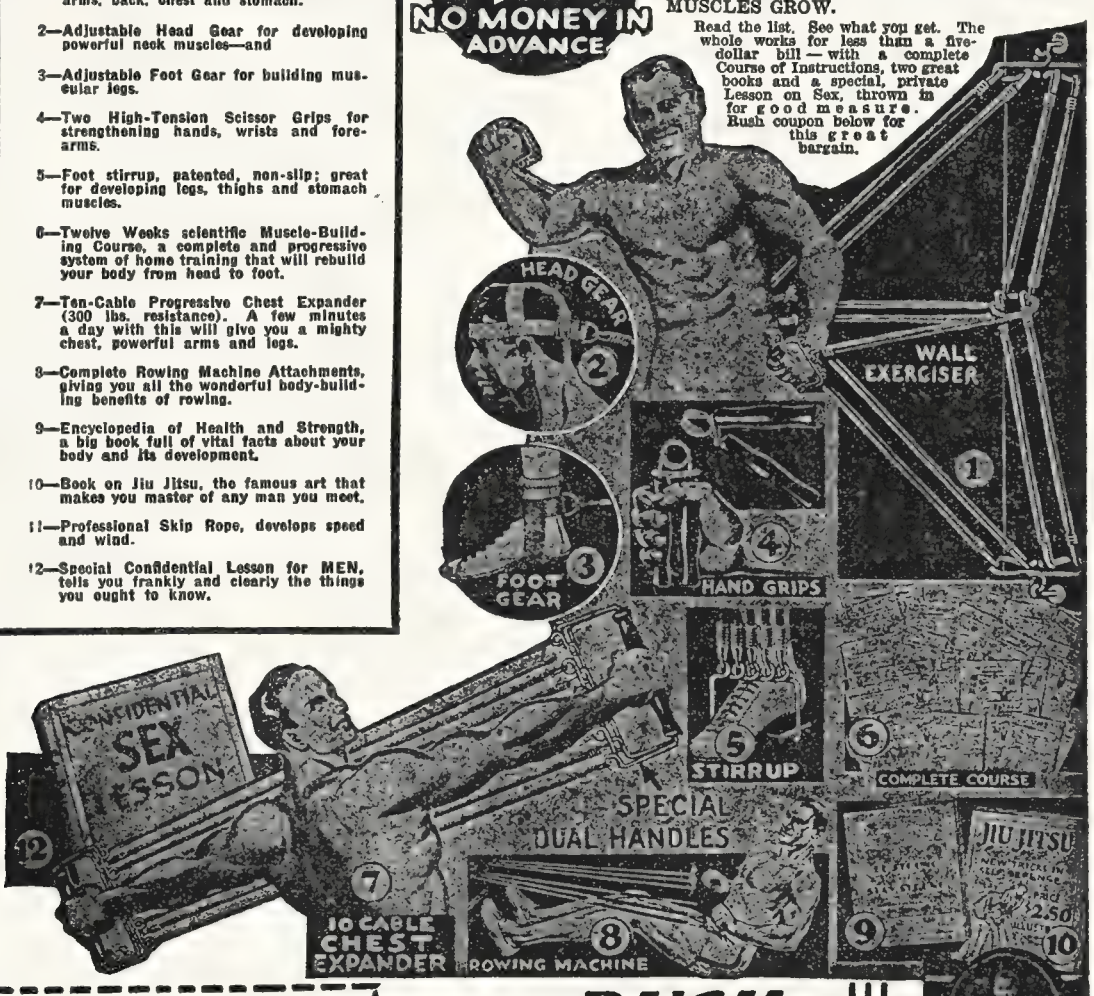
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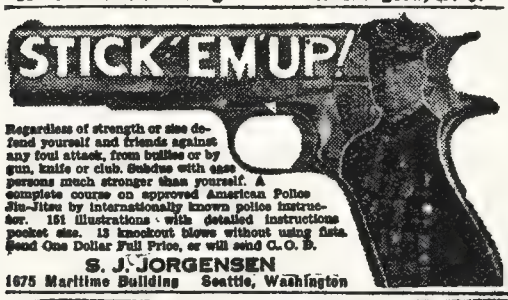
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BANDITS IN ERMINE

(Concluded from Page 90)

they carried already, to lighten themselves.

In the end there were only three snowmen. They stopped and waited for Grider to come up. Two of them were *hung hu tze.* One was Sung Liao. "Good afternoon, my master," said Sung Liao. "Shall I slay these prisoners of mine?"

"No," replied Grider shortly, "they shall be turned over to their own brethren; the *hung hu tze* they were, with the others, trying to double-cross. I think that will settle them properly. We have slain enough."

Sung Liao grinned, and, after a long time, George Grider grinned back.

"Curse you, Sung Liao!" he said. "I'd far rather have you as a friend than an enemy. You are a devil! Who but you would have thought of kidding the *hung hu tze* into wearing ermine on their caps, with black tails hanging down behind? Only a rifleman with telescopic sights could see them, and I have the only such rifle within a million miles. The black ermine tails were good aiming points."

"Yes," said Sung Liao primly, "I am very clever man—for observe that I am most careful not to wear ermine myself!"

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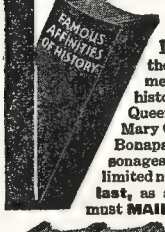
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The frontier of India. And those famous native fighting men led by British officers, the Bengal Lancers, in wild charges, with plunging steeds and zipping bullets—moments filled with racing action in the Hindu'kush Mountains!

It's a novel of Francis X. Riley, of the Bengal Lancers, who loved a fight as well as a friend and was always there when it came to facing danger.

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Riley will captivate you—and you'll be in full sympathy with his motives in opposing the diabolical Russian, Alexis Petroff, who tries to annex an important oil concession by force, fraud and murder.

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short story, THE COILED RAJA, with its giant cobra of mysterious powers. And then there's THE MAFFIA DOOM, by Rex Sherrick—a dramatic story of an American's daring adventure in feud-torn Sicily.

BLUE SMOKE, by Cole Weymouth, is an unusual Western—to appear next month in response to several requests for an occasional Western yarn. It'll grip you from start to finish.

Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson, that favorite writer of adventure stories, who gave us THE FOURTH RING this month, will be back next month with CONRAD THE CRUEL—an exceptional novelette that will appeal to all Wheeler-Nicholson fans, *and everybody else.*

Besides, there will be stories by Arthur J. Burks and Jack D'Arcy—among others.

You can't go wrong on that June issue—it'll set a new high-mark in magazine history!

Before taking leave of you, I can't resist quoting from a letter from Bob Tucker, of Bloomington, Ill.:

> Congratulations on your swell magazine. It's the most I ever got for a dime in my life. Don't forget to have some more Legion and scientific stories. I like them best!

We won't, old man, and thanks! So long—*adventurers!*

—J. S. WILLIAMS.



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HOW SO MANY THOUSANDS OF WOMEN CAN NOW DEPEND ON OUR NEW S. P. RELIEF COMPOUND.

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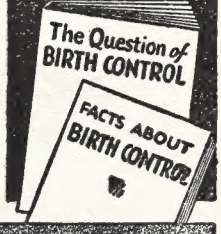
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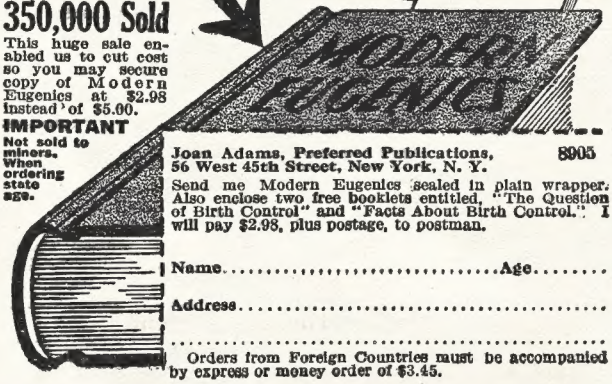


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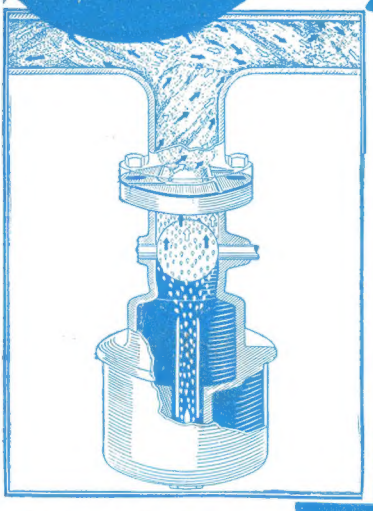
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Automobile owners who have been worrying about gasoline expense will be interested in an amazing test recently conducted by a Texas Motor Car Company. Twenty-three cars were entered in a mileage economy test, the winning car running 51 miles on a gallon of gas, the second car 49 miles on a gallon. When official test records were published it was found the two winning cars were both equipped with Whirlwind gas savers.

"Peak" Contest Mileages

The amazing results obtained in this mileage contest are naturally greater than those obtained in ordinary driving. Careful throttling, most economical speeds—no traffic hold-ups—and no waste of power thru quick stops, help to bring about these "peak" mileages.

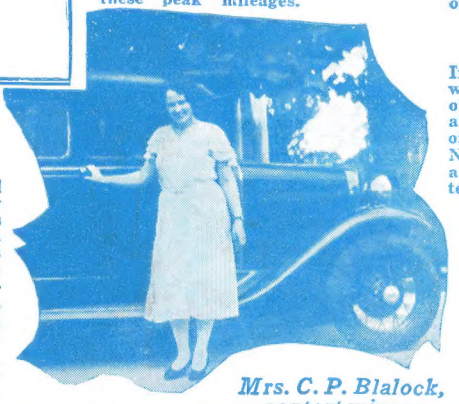
A Test On Your Car

More power, faster pick-up, less carbon, quicker starting, and increased mileage is what users say in telling of their experience with the Whirlwind. Every motorist owes it to himself to test the Whirlwind to prove the results on his own car.

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The principle of the Whirlwind is to slightly compress the partly vaporized gasoline as it passes thru the raised venturi. Extra air enters from four air inlets at such a tangent as to pick up the unvaporized gasoline particles, whirling them into action.

The turbulence created breaks them into a vaporized gas, giving better, smoother power, quicker starting, cutting gasoline waste and carbon formation.



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In just a few minutes the Whirlwind can be installed on any make of car, truck or tractor. It's actually less work than changing your oil or putting water in the battery. No drilling, tapping or changes of any kind necessary. It is guaranteed to work perfectly on any make of car, truck or tractor, large or small, new model or old model. The more you drive the more you save.

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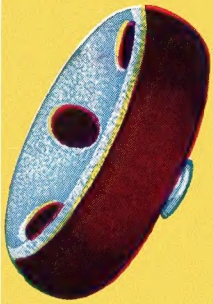
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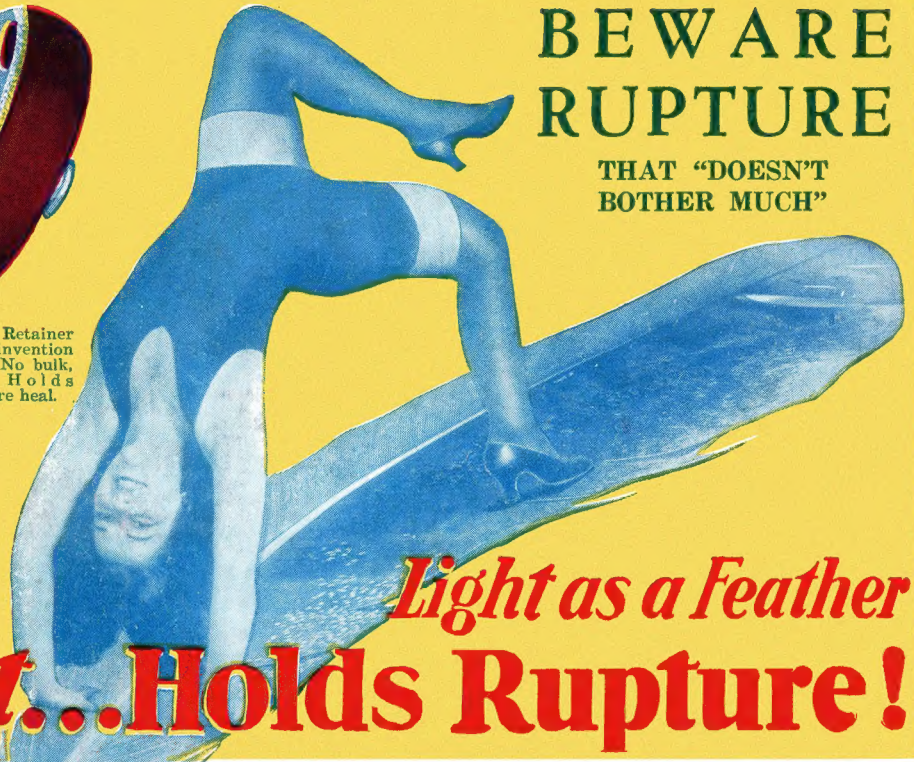
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